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THE RUFFIAN REACHED FOR DANDY VANE'S COLLAR TO DRAG HIM FROM THE ANIMAL'S BACK; BUT AT THAT MOMENT SOMETHING HAPPENED.

OR,

SPORT against SPORT.

A Romance of Magic City.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "WILD VULCAN," "DAISY DARE,"
"IRON FERN, THE MAN OF FIRE," "OLD
MISERY," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"SOMETHING INTERESTING."

MOUNTED on a milk-white horse, a man was riding along the rugged mountain trail that led to Magic City.

The horseman was young and something of a dandy, as could be seen at a glance. He was dressed in a finely-fitting suit of black velvet, the legs of his pantaloons being tucked into the

tops of high boots. He wore a "b'iled" shirt and standing collar, and his head was crowned with a high silk hat. A small bunch of fresh mountain violets was fastened on the lapel of his coat, and not a weapon could be seen about his person.

This neatly-dressed individual was rather handsome, although there was a sad, dreamy look about his dark eyes. A well-trained mustache shaded a firm, yet pleasant mouth, and his square-cut chin denoted a resolute nature. Honesty and integrity were written in every line of his countenance, and a person of good judgment would have pronounced him "a man to tie to."

Despite the fact that the horseman was somewhat below medium height, and was not quite so heavy as the average man, he was a person of rare strength and suppleness. His grace was apparent as he sat in the saddle, seeming for the time a part of the horse. The individual who picked him up as a "weakling," or thought him "skeery," was apt to come to his senses and find he had made a tremendous fool of himself. The dandy was entirely able to look after Number One.

This was Philip Vane Howard, or, as he was better known in the West, Violet Vane, the Velvet Sport.

An honest gambler!

The existence of such a person is not an impossibility, although they are rare indeed.

But, such was Violet Vane. Not that he did not understand all the tricks of the profession, for had it been otherwise, he could have made more money sawing wood than playing cards; but he never employed any of those tricks except in self-defense, when matched with an unscrupulous opponent whose dishonesty it was impossible to expose and prove. At such times he was forced to fight fire with fire, figuratively speaking, and meet the tricky gamester with his own tricks.

When playing in an honest game he depended entirely on his own keen judgment and the wonderful luck that had never failed him.

From camp to camp in the mining regions he wandered, going wherever chance or fancy led him, leading a roving life of excitement and adventure. There was a reason why he chose such a life, as the unhappy look in his eyes plainly indicated.

Vane rode slowly, his head bowed, paying no attention to the wild and picturesque scenery about him. His lips moved, and he muttered:

"Another chapter of my life has closed. I go to face new scenes and new adventures, and another chapter will soon be begun. In this wild life I try to forget the past—to forget what it has cost me. I try to forget I ever loved one who played me false—God bless her! Yes, I say it for all she has done—God bless her! It was not fated she should be mine. Now she is happy with the man she loves, and her child sleeps on her breast! And I—my God! I am a wanderer on the face of the earth!"

What bitter mental anguish was expressed by those words!

Suddenly the breeze sent a slip of paper fluttering along the trail in front of him. It caught his eye.

"A bit of paper," he murmured. "Strange! I wonder how it came here, in this wild place?"

He drew rein, dismounted and picked up the paper. It was folded and seemed like a leaf torn from a pocket diary. When he had unfolded it, he discovered there was writing upon it, and with astonishment he read the following words, which were written with a lead-pencil:

"TO THE UNKNOWN FRIEND WHO FINDS THIS LEAF:—
"I appeal to you for help, for I am a captive in the hands of unscrupulous villains—men who have plotted my death! I was on my way to Magic City to take possession and look after the property left me by the sudden death of my father, when I was captured by two ruffians, since which time—now two days—I have been kept a prisoner in an old hut among the mountains. From a conversation I overheard I know there is a plan afoot to rob me of what is rightfully mine, and—oh, God!—I fear I am to be murdered! I heard them whisper of putting me out of the way! I have also heard enough to cause me to have a horrible suspicion that my father, Daniel Marden, was murdered by these same scoundrels! To-night I am to be taken from this old hut and carried to another place of imprisonment, and I have determined to drop this piece of paper while on the journey, hoping Providence will cause it to reach the hands of one who will aid me. My heart-felt—I hear a step!—some one comes! I must—"

That was all.

The writing, though hurriedly scrawled, was plainly that of a female.

But it ended abruptly, without so much as a signature.

For a long time Violet Vane stood beside his

milk-white horse, staring at the strange note, reading it over and over, and wrinkling his forehead with a scowl. Finally he gave a low whistle, then muttered:

"Well, here is something interesting! I seem to have stumbled upon a mystery and struck the scent of crooked work before setting foot within the limits of Magic City. I wish this had been finished and signed. Still I have a pointer as to the name of the writer. If she is an unmarried daughter of this Daniel Marden, of course her name is Marden. Vane, old man, there is work for you in Magic City!"

Again he fell to studying the bit of paper, reading it over and over until every word was fixed in his mind. Then he carefully folded it and placed it within a note-book he took from an inner pocket, after which the book was restored to its usual place of concealment.

Then Vane swung into the saddle again.

"Here is a chance for me to turn detective again," he murmured, as the white steed carried him onward toward Magic City. "My success at Coffin City leads me to think I might make quite a ferret. Old Daddy Duzenberry is to meet me in Magic, although I shall probably get there first. It is possible the queer old fellow may be able to give me some assistance, for he is sharp and trustworthy. If I am suspected as being interested in this business, it may be necessary for me to assume a disguise, so I will provide for such an emergency at the start."

Thirty minutes later he came in sight of Magic City, a little camp of two hundred and fifty souls, lying well down in a picturesque pocket through which ran a brawling mountain stream.

Vane paused and surveyed the town.

He saw a few placers were being worked, for there were men toiling at sluice and rocker near the stream; but the principal cause of the camp's existence seemed to be a mine whose mouth he could see in the mountain-side. The monotonous sound of an ore-crusher came to his ears, and he discerned men and mules moving about the buildings at the opening of the shaft.

Having "taken in" the town, the Velvet Sport rode onward down the trail.

Entering the camp, he halted in front of the building which bore a sign reading as follows:

"BANG UP HOTEL.

"HI JENKS, Head Boss.

"Good Feed, Good Drink, Clean Bunks,
Undertaker Next Door."

This singular reference to the undertaker was explained when Vane came to read that worthy's sign. It bore these words:

"BOB JENKS, UNDERTAKER.

"Plain Four-Cornered Coffin Made to
Order Dirt Cheap."

The hotel proprietor and the undertaker were relatives, probably brothers.

There were several loafers lounging in front of the hotel when Violet Vane drew rein, one of whom, a large, brawny, ugly-looking customer, arose to his feet, stared hard at the stranger in town, then placed his huge hands on his hips, his arms akimbo, threw back his head and burst into a hoarse laugh.

Quite naturally, every eye was turned on the velvet dandy, for there was much curiosity to know how the big fellow's coarse merriment and evident derision would affect the newcomer.

In a moment Vane understood what was coming. He had floated around in the West enough to know there was trouble brewing when a big tough like this one selected him as an object of ridicule. He was not the person to avoid an encounter, for he had learned that the only way for him to hold his own in a strange camp was to "show his sand" as soon as he entered the place.

The sport instantly decided on an old ruse of his, and swinging his right leg over the pommel of his saddle, he sat facing the hotel, staring in apparent amazement at the laughing ruffian, his under jaw having dropped till his mouth was agape and the expression of his face that of blank surprise.

At this the big fellow laughed the harder, and several of the others joined in the merriment.

"Oh, ther great catamaran!" snorted the tough. "Jest take a look at it! Hain't thet thar er sight fer ye, oh, my countrymen! Hain't thet ernough ter wring tears frum er stun? Oh, holy poker! Jest looker ther critter, will ye?"

At this the dandy seemed to gasp, with difficulty:

"Goodneth gwathuth!"

"Haw! haw! haw!" roared the big fellow, flapping his arms as if they were wings. "Did ye heur thet, pards? Huah! huah!"

"I weally believe the cweacher can talk, ye know!" exclaimed Vane, as if still more astonished. "It ith wonderful what things they are twaining jackathes to do in these dayths—it weally ith!"

This brought a snicker from the others, and caused the big ruffian to suddenly grow sober.

"Looker hyer!" he growled, craning his thick neck forward and glaring at Vane with a bulldog expression. "D'yer know who I be?"

The Velvet Sport ignored the question, but muttered, as if speaking to himself:

"It mutht have ethcaped fwom thome menagerwie. I will have to thecure it and take it to New York faw the Zoo. I weally believe there will be money in the cweacher."

"Waal, I'll be jozzled!" snarled the ruffian.

Some of the others laughed, and one cried:

"Ther dude is makin' sport of ye, Sam, shore's yer' born!"

In truth the tables had been turned in a remarkably brief space of time, and the tough found himself the object of derision instead of the one who was having the fun.

"Go fer him, Sam!"

"Sp'il his mug!"

"Knock him silly!"

"L'arn him better'n ter laff at ye!"

The bully deliberately spat on his hands, keeping his his eyes on the dandy all the time.

"I'm goin' ter kill the leetle runt!" he declared.

"Oh, gwathuth!" gasped the velvet fop, beginning to look alarmed.

At this a gleam of evil satisfaction shot from the big man's eyes and he advanced a few steps.

"Yep," he added, "I'm jest nacherly goin' ter chaw him all up. I won't leave ernough of ther blasted dood ter hev er foonerall over!"

"I believe the wetch weally meanth it!"

"You kin bet thet high hat I mean it! P'r'aps ye don't know w'at I be?"

"Baw Jawvel you are wight. I thould have to look in the nawcherall hithtory to find yer name, ye know."

"Waal, I'll tell ye w'at I be—I'm er terror! Round in these yere parts I'm called Sledge-hammer Sam, an' thar's my sledge-hammer," clinching his huge hand and shaking it under sport's the nose. "With thet thar thing I'm jest goin' ter nacherly knock thunder outer you, you leetle tailor's dummy!"

CHAPTER II.

VANE IS PUZZLED.

"GOODNETH!" cried the dandy, starting back and catching hold of his nose with his thumb and first finger. "Pleathe don't do that till you have wathed your handth! The sthmell ith weally thocking!"

"Ugh-r-r-rr!" snarled Sledge-hammer Sam. "Thet is the wu'st yit! Now I will kill ye without so much ez er throb of regret! Kem down off thet boss!"

The ruffian reached for Dandy Vane's collar to drag him from the animal's back; but at that moment something happened.

The Velvet Sport's foot shot upward; the toe of his riding-boot caught the bully under the chin, and, a moment later Sledge-hammer Sam was lying on his back in the dust.

Slipping from the saddle, the wearer of the violets motioned to the hostler, who was standing near. When the man approached, he said, in a low tone:

"Take excellent care of my horse, please; I am going to stop here."

The hostler gave him a queer look, but led the white steed away. However, he paused at a certain distance to observe the outcome of the fight.

The overturned bully sat up and glared around:

"W'at done it!" he mumbled, carefully feeling of his jaw. "Seems like my chin wuz all tored ter slivers. I jest reckon er reg'ler charge of dymonite must hev s'ploded thar! It's derved lucky my tongue wuzn't atween my teeth, else I w'udn't hev hed nary tongue now."

Then he ceased speaking and glared hard at Vane. The spectators were all on their feet now, for they felt sure they were going to see something worth witnessing in a few moments.

"Sam 'll shorely kill ther dood now!"

"You bet!"

"I w'udn't be in thet velvet critter's place fer five thousan' dollars!"

"Bob Jenks 'll git er job!"
 "So you're er kicker, be ye?" growled the Sledge-hammer, arising to his feet. "Thet's ther way ye treats people, is it? Waal, I'm derned ef thet don't settle it! Say yer pra'rs!"
 "Oh, thir!" cried Vane, in assumed terror.
 "What would you weally do?"
 The tough laughed, harshly.

"I did jest think of l'arnin' ye er lesson at fu'st," he asserted; "but now I'm goin' ter chaw ye up. W'at wuz you thinkin' of ter come inter this yere town togged in thet thar way? We don't 'low but one man in Magic City ter dress like thet, an' he's Elegant Ed. Thar he is!"

The speaker pointed toward a man who had come out of the hotel, and Vane cast a hasty glance in that direction to behold a medium-sized man attired in the finest cloth, patent leathers, white shirt and silk hat. His face was cold but handsome, a heavy mustache shading his lips. He was calmly smoking a cigar.

"Thet's ther only man we 'low ter swell roun' an' wear er silk hat in Magic," Sam again asserted. "Ther fu'st thing I'm goin' ter do is bu'st thet dice-box on yer head, sonny."

Clinching his rude fists, the bully rushed straight at Vane, but the dandy dodged. Sam followed him up, his eyes blazing fiercely.

"I'll l'arn ye ter kick me on the jaw! I'll punch ther head offen ye! Let me git my claws on ye, an' then I'll tear ye all ter pieces!"

"Help! help!" faintly squawked the dandy, as he continued to avoid the bully of the camp. "I cawn't fight thith horwid beatht! Take him off, pleathe!"

But nobody paid any attention to the supplication.

"Mutht I fight?" moaned the Velvet Sport. "Oh, marmar! What a horwid thing to do! I wish I had nevah come to thith dweadful plathe!"

The crowd began to laugh, for the spectacle was really a comical one.

"Looker ther foot-race!"

"Ther dood's er dodger!"

"Sam'll ketch him!"

Suddenly Vane faced his foe.

"Now I've got ye!" gritted the tough, reaching out to grasp the dandy.

Quick as thought the hand was knocked aside, Vane leaped forward, and then Sledge-hammer Sam went reeling backward before a steam-drill blow.

A cry of amazement came from the spectators.

"Ther dandy punched him!"

"Shore's yer shoutin'!"

"It wuz er clean cut!"

"Brace up, Sam!"

There was no need to advise the bully to "brace up," for he was fairly fuming with rage, and as soon as he regained his "level" he made another rush for the deceptive fop.

"Rot ye!" he panted. "You're wuss then er 'skeeter, but I'll crunch ye w'en I do ketch ye."

"When you do!" laughed the dandy, dancing lightly around his big foe. "My dear thir, you will have to get a move on yourthelf before you do. I nevah thaw thuth a big blunderheeth in all my life—weally I nevah did!"

"Oh, great catamaran! Holy smoke! Thunder an' tar! I'll wring ye all ter pieces! Ugh-r-r-r-r!"

With this savage snarl, Sledge-hammer Sam began pounding the air in a vain endeavor to strike his foe. Time after time he delivered telling blows straight at the little sport's head, but Vane did not wait to receive them.

He did not content himself, however, with dodging the blows, for he sent back some in return. He began pounding the bully's exposed body, for Sledge-hammer Sam knew very little about the manly art, and every blow counted. Once in a while he would send the tough staggering backward with a heavy one on the jaw or scone.

During all this time the dandy had not removed so much as his tall hat, and, although he had made several attempts to do so, Sam had been unable to crush it. This seemed strange to the spectators, and they yelled:

"Kill ther hat!"

"Sp'ile ther dice-box!"

"Crush ther shiner!"

But one of them shouted:

"Sam's met his match, ur my name hain't Brad Thorne!"

This became more apparent as the minutes passed, and the big fellow continued to get the worst of it. The crowd ceased its cries and watched with new interest and increasing wonder. Could it be possible the lipping fop would prove a match for the acknowledged "Chief of Magic City?"

Elegant Ed puffed furiously at his cigar as he watched the contest.

"Hanged if that fellow isn't a game-cock!" he muttered, his eyes following Vane's movements. "I swear I cannot help admiring the way he handles himself! There is something singular about him, and I reckon he is not what he seems. If he downs Sam, it will fall to me to cut his comb."

Suddenly a great cry went up from the throng which had gathered; with one terrific blow, Violet Vane had sent the bully to the ground.

"Didn't I tole yer!" yelled Brad Thorne. "I knowed it all ther time!"

But, Sledge-hammer Sam was not whipped—a fact which he announced as he arose to his feet.

A knife gleamed in his hand!

A warning cry broke from the throng, but Vane did not need it. He had met men like the bully before, and well knew the knife was their favorite resort when they saw they were fairly flogged.

As Sam rushed forward Vane sprung to meet him. The knife descended, but the bully's thick wrists were caught by fingers which seemed like grips of steel. Then came a terrible wrench, and, with a yell of pain, the "chief" dropped the knife and fell on his knees.

With a surge and another twist, the velvet dandy flipped the man fairly upon his back in the dust, the bully's right arm being sprained so badly it was useless for the time.

Then Vane turned calmly away and moved toward the hotel steps, his dark eyes running over the throng.

"I've seen thet galoot afore!" cried Brad Thorne. "I saw him over in Coffin City. Dern it all! thet is Violet Vane!"

At this Elegant Ed started, and gazed with greater interest at the dandy, making it plain he had heard of Violet Vane before. He stood fairly in the center of the steps, and he made no offer to move as Vane came up. The Velvet Sport halted, and the eyes of the two men met. Unwaveringly they stared at each other, and each recognized a foe in the man who confronted him.

Politely lifting his silk hat, Vane said:

"Will you have the kindness to permit me to pass, sir?"

Elegant Ed blew out a ring of smoke, showed his faultless white teeth in a tigerish smile, lifted his hat a bit and moved aside, saying:

"With pleasure, sir."

There was another exchange of dagger-like glances, then Vane went on into the hotel.

"I shall have trouble with that man," decided the sport. "It is plain he is a card-sharp, and he will probably try to pick a quarrel over the pasteboards. Well, he will find me ready for him."

"I am known here by my traveling title, so it is useless for me to attempt to keep up a deception. One of those fellows out there shouted my name and declared he had seen me in Coffin City."

He registered as "Violet Vane, Coffin City."

After he had eaten a square meal, he sent to the stable for a pair of shoes he had brought with him, and a sigh of relief escaped his lips when his feet were withdrawn from the riding-boots.

Jenks, the landlord, was very attentive, for Vane had paid his bills three days in advance and had not demurred at the exorbitant price charged. So when the sport seated himself by an open window to enjoy a good cigar, the proprietor of the hotel sat down near at hand and volunteered a large amount of information about Magic City and its inhabitants.

While they were sitting there a rather nice-looking young lady rode past on a spirited horse. She sat as if glued to the saddle, and Vane followed her with admiring eyes till she vanished down the street.

"A graceful rider!" he exclaimed. "Who is she, landlord?"

"Thet's old Dan Marden's gal," was the prompt reply. "Her dad's dead—shot hisself, though I dunno why he sh'ud 'a' done it seein's he wuz makin' money hand over fist. But, he wuz quare, old Marden wuz. Left all his property ter his gal as you saw an' ter er boy thet's dead, I reckon."

It is needless to say Vane was interested.

"It appears to me I have heard of Dan Marden," he remarked, deliberately blowing out a ring of smoke, appearing quite calm, although his heart had given a great thump and was beating faster than usual.

"Quite likely ye hev ef ye ever heerd much of anything 'bout Magic City," nodded Jenks,

"It wuz him as made this town. He diskivered ther Leetle Marion Mine, an' Magic City sprung inter existence arter thet."

"How long ago did he die?"

"Two weeks yisterday."

"And when did his daughter arrive in town?"

"Three days ergo."

The Velvet Sport seemed to have struck a puzzle.

CHAPTER III.

THE SPORT'S GALLANT ACT.

VIOLET VANE quickly took a mental observation of the situation. Could it be Daniel Marden's daughter had escaped her foes and reached Magic City in safety? If so, she certainly would have related her adventures, and the landlord must know something of them.

"Did the young lady come on the regular stage?" Vane carelessly inquired.

"Yep."

"I do not suppose this section is troubled with road-agents?"

"Nary whit! We did hev er leetle whirl with ther critters 'bout three months ergo, but ther citizens jest formed er kermitty an' went fer 'em. In jest four days we hung five men, an' thar hain't bin no sign of agents sence thet. Thet jest cleaned 'em out, you bet!"

"Then the young lady's journey to Magic City was of an uneventful nature?"

"Waal, I dunno. I never heerd her say anythin' 'bout it a tall."

The mystery deepened. If Miss Marden had been kidnapped, she surely would have told of her adventure on escaping from the clutches of her enemies.

What meant the slip of paper he had found on the mountain trail? Was it a "fake?"

After a few moments of silence, during which his brain was busy, Vane spoke again:

"You say Daniel Marden committed suicide?"

The landlord looked around as if to make sure there was no one else within hearing, then he answered in a low tone:

"No, I don't say nary sech thing."

"But I surely understood you so."

"Waal, mebbe I did guv ye thet impression; but I don't say so, all ther same. I hain't makin' much talk 'bout it, anyhow."

Vane believed himself on track of something interesting, and by skillful questioning he led the man on till Jenks said:

"It has allus seemed 'tarnal sing'ler ter me thet er man like Dan Marden sh'ud kermitt suicide. W'y, he wuz on ther high road of prosperity, jest makin' money fast as he c'u'd pull it in. Ther Leetle Marion wuz payin' big, an' Dan seemed ter be er jolly feller all ther time. He didn't hev enny enemies thet I knows of, an' he owned ther best house in Magic. Was allus tellin' 'bout hev'n' his gal come out hyer, some time. She was at school. Thar wuz anthin' 'bout er boy thet wuz wild an' run erway, though I never caught jest all of it. Sence Dan died I've heerd ther boy's dead."

"Waal, things wuz thet-a-way w'en one mornin' Dan Marden wuz foun' dead in his own house. Ther winder wuz open, an' he lay on ther floor with his revolver in his han' an' er bullet in his brain. One chamber o' ther revolver hed been fired. At fu'st some thought it wuz murder, but w'en they begun ter 'zamine an' see thar wurn't no robbery, they didn't know w'at ter think. Then nobody knew of Dan hev'n' any enemies, which wuz 'tarnal sing'lar, fer er man in his place. Thar wuz an' inquest, an' ther jury guv a verdict of suicide."

Then Hi Jenks leaned toward the Velvet Sport, speaking in a whisper:

"But, I'll tell ye this: I don't take er blamed bit of stock in ther suicide theory!"

"Then you believe the man was murdered?"

"Ef he didn't kermitt suicide, he wuz murdered!"

"But, what was the object?"

"Thar—right thar you've got me, pard!"

"There is never a murder without an object, unless the man who commits the crime is a maniac."

"I reckon ye're right, but I hain't got this yere case through my ole head, though I hev puzzled over it some."

"How does Miss Marden seem to feel over her father's death? I did not notice she was in mourning."

"I 'low she hain't got no mournin' fer her ridin' suit. She wears black w'en she don't go out ridin'."

"She might wear a veil then."

Vane shook his head, feeling sure there was something strange about the case. The conviction increased when he was informed that Miss

Marden had been out to ride every day since arriving at Magic City.

"Does no one accompany her?"

"Nop. She don't seem ter keer fer any one."

After talking with the landlord a while longer, the sport arose and sauntered out of the hotel. He was favored by the curious glances of the crowd gathered in the shade in front of the building, and more than one admiring whisper came to his ears. Noting Elegant Ed was not with the throng, he walked slowly onward, apparently indifferent to the stir his appearance had created.

Unconsciously he turned in the direction pursued by the young lady he had seen from the hotel window.

"It's plain I have struck a mystery that needs clearing up," he cogitated, as he sauntered along. "It is my opinion there has been a large amount of crooked work here, but, if I can get at the facts, I will be pretty apt to step on some rogue's toes. I believe the note I found on the trail is honest and square, and, if it is, there is something rotten in Denmark. A bold game is being played, and somebody's hands are red with human blood. I have brought more than one piece of villainy to an end, and I will see what I can do on this case. For a time I will turn detective again, for the excitement of the thing, and to satisfy my interest in this strange note."

"My first move must be to meet this girl who claims to be Daniel Marden's daughter. She is probably an impostor and an adventuress, but, there is certainly a power behind her, and that is what I must get at. It will puzzle me to find an excuse for calling on Miss Marden, self-styled. I must set my wits at work about it."

But, fortune had decided to favor the sport.

Buried in thought, he walked along until he had passed beyond the limits of the town and entered a canyon.

Suddenly the clear crack of a revolver gave him a start, and the next moment the gorge rung with the frightened cry of a female, followed by a sharp clatter of approaching hoofs.

A short distance ahead of Vane was an abrupt bend which kept from his view the exciting scene being enacted, but he knew the horse would soon burst into view. The cry he had heard led him to believe the rider of the horse was a woman.

Perhaps the animal was running away with her!

To think was to act with Vane Howard. In a moment he determined on a course of action in case it proved he was right—he would make a desperate attempt to stop the runaway.

Gathering himself for action, he was ready when the horse came into view round the bend.

It was as he surmised; the horse was running away, and, clinging to his back, was a girl, while one of the reins hung dangling as if cut clean off.

When the horse appeared Vane was ready for the run, and took the same course of the frightened animal, having the start and aiming to intercept the creature.

Fortunately the horse seemed blind with terror, and so it did not swerve and thwart the sport.

As the runaway came up, Vane caught it by the bit, getting a firm hold at the first grasp, which was a most lucky thing, as he would not have been given time for a second attempt.

"Cling fast!" he cried; and then he exerted his wonderful strength.

With a powerful twist that threatened to break the animal's jaw, he set the horse back on his haunches, something like a laugh breaking from his lips as he felt sure he was master of the situation.

CHAPTER IV.

SAVED BY A TRICK.

THE horse recognized its master, and with a few soothing words Vane swiftly cooled the frightened animal down.

The girl slipped from the saddle as soon as it was safe to do so and stood watching the sport till he had overcome the fears of the horse.

"Oh, sir!" she cried; "how can I thank you for saving my life!"

"Thanks are quite unnecessary," smiled the dandy, lifting his silk hat gallantly. "Do not put yourself to the trouble."

"Oh, but I must thank you! and that will be but poorly showing my gratitude. You see the bridle-rein is cut, and so Moro was quite unmanageable."

"I see."

"It was fortunate for me you were here."

There are but few men who could have stopped him so easily, if they had succeeded in stopping him at all."

Her words were flattering enough, but her blue eyes spoke more than her words expressed.

"She is a coquette," thought Vane.

He saw the girl was decidedly charming, to say the least. She could not have been much more than twenty years of age. Her figure, though slightly below medium height, was perfectly molded, its outline being one of curves with no angles visible. Her riding-habit displayed it in all its charming contour. She was neither slim nor too plump, but seemed fashioned in a happy medium.

Her face was oval and her complexion good, although it was slightly tanned by exposure. There was a flush of perfect health in her cheeks, and her lips were red as berries, being a trifle too full, if anything, thus having just a suggestion of sensuality. When she smiled her chin had a strange quiver that was most bewitching. Her hair was golden-brown, being coiled in a knot at the back of her head.

At a glance Violet Vane recognized the charms of the girl whom he had saved. He was struck with her uncommon beauty, and in his heart he wondered if she could be an adventuress. Such a thing did not seem possible.

"I am sure you give me too much credit," returned the sport. "I did the most natural thing under the circumstances. I saw you were in danger, and I did my level best to save you, as hundreds of others would have done in the same position."

"But only one out of a hundred could have succeeded. You took a great risk, sir, and I will not soon forget it."

She seemed sincere, but Vane wondered at her coolness after such an exciting adventure.

"By Jove she has nerve!" he thought.

Aloud he said:

"How did your rein become cut in this manner?"

At this the girl cast something like a frightened glance over her shoulder, the color leaving her cheeks for an instant.

"It was done by a bullet."

"By a bullet? That is strange."

"I was fired at back there."

"Fired at—you? Great Scott! Who did such a thing?"

"A man who arose from behind some rocks. It was the sight of him and the whistle of the bullet that frightened Moro."

"How far back was that?"

"Only a short distance beyond the bend."

Vane came to a sudden determination.

"Here, can you take care of this horse now?"

"Yes, sir. But, what are you going to do?"

"I am going back there and find that dastardly whelp who fired at you!"

She caught him by the arm with one gloved hand.

"No, no!" she cried. "Do not do it, sir, I entreat! He is a desperate man, and he might shoot you! Do not venture—"

She paused abruptly, for she saw she had struck the wrong chord; the man before her was not one to be detained by fear. Realizing this, she turned upon another course.

"Do not leave me now! I have not recovered my composure. I beg you not to leave me!"

"But the dastard may make his escape!"

"Let him go, for the present."

"If we let him go now, he may yet find a chance to do his foul work before he can be prevented."

"No; for I will have him looked after."

"Then you know him?"

She hesitated.

"I have seen him in the past," she reluctantly confessed. "I knew his face."

"Then it was an old enemy?"

The girl bowed.

"Will you tell me his name?"

She broke into a short laugh and seemed confused. For a moment she turned away, and Vane was puzzled to understand her manner and its meaning. When she turned back her face was very grave.

"I have a favor to ask of you," she said.

"It shall be granted," was his impulsive assurance.

"It is that you do not seek to meet the man who fired the shot at me and that you make no mention of the occurrence in Magic City."

He bowed. "You have my pledge, lady."

She held out her hand, a grateful look in her blue eyes.

"I thank you," came softly from her red lips.

"It is a favor I will remember."

He clasped her gloved hand, and felt a gentle pressure of those slender fingers—a pressure that

sent an electric thrill along his arm. Their eyes met, and he saw no gleam of treachery in her blue orbs.

"Great heavens!" was his mental exclamation; "can this beautiful girl be an impostor—an adventuress? I cannot believe it! Her face is frank and open as the day. It must be this is the genuine Marion Marden!"

"Now," she said, "we have arrived at an agreement, as it were; but as yet we are strangers to each other. Of course, I have not a card with me. I am Marion Marden, and anybody in Magic City can tell you where I live. You must call."

Vane produced a card and handed it to her.

"I am more fortunate than you," he laughed. "I always carry cards."

"Philip Vane Howard," she read. Then she looked him fairly in the face again, saying: "I like that name."

"I am glad you do," he assured.

"You will call on me? It is so lonesome here, and I am just from school. I long for some one to talk with."

"I will call."

"Thank you. To-morrow?"

"Yes, to-morrow P. M."

"I will be expecting you. Do not fail to come."

"I will not."

"Now, can you fix this rein so I can ride home?"

"I think so."

In a few moments he had knotted the rein securely so it could not slip, and it was found still quite long enough for use. Again she thanked him, and then he assisted her to mount.

It seemed as if there was an unnecessary deliberation about his movements, a clinging of his touch, as if he were loth to part with her. She smiled down at him from the saddle.

"You will not forget me?"

"Forget you?" he repeated, a strange thrill in his voice. "I will never forget you!"

That was enough; what woman could ask more? She felt the emotion expressed by his words, even though his voice was even and deliberate in its tone. The color in her cheeks grew stronger, and then it suddenly faded as if with fear. A light of terror came into her eyes for a moment, and he saw her hands tremble.

What did it mean?

The question was not answered.

With a word of parting, she rode away toward Magic City. Before she disappeared she looked back and waved her hand, to which he lifted his hat in response.

Then he was alone in the canyon—apparently. Seating himself on a boulder near at hand, he fell into a reverie. Some of his thoughts were expressed aloud.

"It seems as if fortune had favored me. I was wondering how I could meet this girl, what excuse I could find, when this occurrence gave me the very opening I was desiring. But I am disappointed. I expected to find a cold and calculating adventuress, and I found a warm, impulsive girl. By Jove! she is handsome!"

"Who could have fired at her? But for my promise, I would try to find the devil now and call him to an account. And why should any one fire at her? Gracious! can it be she is the genuine Marion Marden, and her enemies, driven to desperate measures, are trying to put her out of the way in some manner? I declare it looks like that!"

"The thing that puzzles me most is why, if she is the genuine Marion, she tells nothing of her adventures after being kidnapped by her enemies. If she were a man, I could understand that, well enough. But as she is not a man, I am puzzled. Perhaps she has good reasons for keeping it quiet, and it is possible she will tell me when I call to-morrow. If I can do so without being too inquisitive, I shall question her some."

"The girl has a charming face! Those eyes—those red lips! By Jove! I begin to fear I am hit! I am afraid I stand on the verge of making a fool of myself. If she is an adventuress, her acting is most admirable."

"But stop! That look of fear! What did it mean? The color suddenly left her face and a haunted light filled her eyes. I almost fancied she was on the point of fainting, but she quickly recovered her composure. I cannot understand the meaning of that."

For some time he sat thinking it over, but the more he thought the more puzzled he grew.

At length, he arose to his feet.

"Well, I will return to town, for it is past sunset and night is coming on."

It was true darkness was not far away. Already there were dusky shadows in the canyon,

but he paid little attention to his surroundings as he walked along.

"Halt thar, you critter!"

The words grated harshly on his ears. He looked up to see a man confronting him with a cocked revolver.

It was Sledge-hammer Sam!

"Hello!" chuckled the ruffian, with an evil laugh. "So I hev caught ye, hev I, purty bird? Wal, wall I reckon I'll jest rumple up yer feathers er bit. I've got er leetle score ter squar' with ye. Han's up!"

"Stand aside and let me pass!" commanded Vane, sternly.

"Not by er derved sight! You can't come nary bit of thet on this chick! Ef you don't putt yer han's up ter once, I'm derved ef I don't salt ye 'thout no more p'laver!"

The tough meant it, and Vane saw he must obey or be shot down in cold blood, so he elevated his hands.

"Thet's right," nodded the desperado, with an ugly leer. "I reckon you knows which side yer bread is buttered on. Oh, hain't I goin' ter soke ye!"

Vane discerned that the man was drunk. It was probable he had been "filling up" since the encounter in front of the hotel, intending all the time to tackle the sport again. Not only was he drunk, but he was "ugly drunk." There was no telling what such a rascal would do while under the influence of liquor, and the Velvet Sport knew his situation was one of personal peril.

"Oh, yes!" chuckled Sam, nodding his head and rolling his bloodshot eyes; "I'm goin' ter fix ye fer w'at you done! I'm ther Chief of Magic City, an' I don't 'low no leetle runts like you ter down me fer keeps. I've got my own private graveyard up ther gulch hyer a piece, an' I'll plant ye thar. You'll never be missed any ter speak of, an' them that misses ye won't make no fuss over yer disappearance."

"What do you mean to do?" asked Vane, calmly.

"Ho! ho! ho!" came harshly from the tough's lips. "So ye are beginnin' ter git kinder intrusted like? Wal, you've got good reasons ter be intrusted. W'at am I goin' ter do? D'yer see this gun?"

"Yes."

"Wal, it's loaded—yes, it am! I've got ther drap on ye."

"Well?"

"I'm goin' ter shoot ye."

"In cold blood?"

"Cold blood ur hot blood don't make no dif with me."

"Aren't you going to give me a chance for my life?"

"W'at kind of er chance?"

"An even chance with you. Of course you are not going to shoot me while I am standing with my hands elevated in this way?"

"Oh, I hain't, hain't I? Wal, thet's whar ye fools yerself, fer I jest bel!"

"It will be murder!"

"Pish! W'at's thet! I've killed lots of fellers in thet way."

The ruffian made the declaration with evident pride, and Vane shuddered as he saw the kind of a man he had to deal with.

"Are ye goin' ter beg?" asked Sam. "Go erhead, fer I wants ter heur ye. Thet'd tickle me like fun!"

"You have made a big mistake if you think you will hear me beg."

"So ye hain't goin' ter beg fer yer life?"

"Nary beg."

"Then I reckon I might jest ez well finish ye off. Say yer pra's an' make ready fer ther final flop."

The tough really meant to shoot.

"Are you aware I have friends who will avenge me?"

"Dern yer friends!"

"You may say so now, but they will know no rest till they have bunted you down."

"I don't keer er hoot fer 'em!"

"You would be apt to care if you knew just how you stood at this minute. You would be apt to care if you knew one of my friends was behind you with a cocked revolver held within two feet of your head."

Sam grinned.

"But thar hain't no such galoot thar. You can't fool me in thet way."

Then the tough heard a voice behind him say:

"You are mistaken, Sam. I have the drop on you! Hands up, or I will blow the roof of your head off!"

With a snarl of amazement and fury, the tough whirled to confront the individual behind

him. To his astonishment he saw no one. He had no time to wonder what it meant, for Violet Vane's hard fist struck him in the back of his head, and a moment later he was stretched face downward on the ground.

He had been tricked!

CHAPTER V.

ELEGANT ED'S LITTLE GAME.

In a moment Violet Vane was upon the ruffian's back, pinning the stunned man to the ground, as he swiftly disarmed him.

His ventriloquial powers had stood him in good stead and saved his life without a doubt. By a trick of his voice he had led the Sledge-hammer to believe there was some one behind him.

"You see the tables are turned, my dear sir," laughed Vane, as he secured the weapons of the tough. "Just at the moment when you fancied yourself high cock of the walk you are beautifully fooled. It is very aggravating I will confess, but such things will occur."

The would-be murderer was too dazed and astounded to make any resistance, and Vane had soon disarmed him. Taking possession of the desperado's weapons, he sat down on a bowlder near at hand, holding Sam "covered" with one of his own revolvers. The tough sat up and stared around, still looking for the man who had spoken behind him.

"Whar did ther cuss go ter so quick?" he mumbled, shaking his head. "He must be er holy dodger!"

Vane laughed aloud.

"Well, he is pretty quick," acknowledged the sport. "He is always around when I want him, and nobody else seems able to see him."

The tough could not understand it, and freely confessed to that fact.

"Well, I would not puzzle my head over it if I were you," said Vane. "It is a small matter anyway. I suppose you are ready to climb the golden stairs?"

"W'at's thet?"

"I suppose you are ready to shuffle off this mortal coil, for of course I will treat you as you were about to serve me."

"You don't mean ter shoot me, pard?"

"Don't I? Well, if not, why not?"

"Oh, ye w'u'dn't do thet!"

"But you were about to serve me that way."

"No I wuzn't nuther."

"But you said so."

"I wuz only foolin'."

"That won't hold water. I saw it in your eye. You meant to shoot me, and now it is my duty to serve you with a dose of your own medicine. Say your prayers."

The rascal flopped over on his knees, holding out his hands to Vane in supplication.

"Oh, say, pard, don't ye do it! Don't be hard on me! I reckon I am er dite full of bug-juice, but I never meant ter salt ye! Don't shoot, pard—don't, fer God's sake!"

Vane gave an exclamation of disgust.

"You miserable coward!" he cried. "You haven't a bit of sand! Take your medicine like a man."

"No, no, no! I hain't reddy ter die yit! Jest let me off this time, pard! Don't shoot!"

"If I let you off, you must tell who put you up to this job."

"Thar didn't nobody," declared Sam, hesitatingly. "I wuz jest doin' of it ter git even fer ther lickin' ye guv me. But I didn't mean ter shoot ye a tall!" he hastily added. "Thet's ther honest gospel truth, pard!"

"Well, I see I will have to shoot you, for you do not mean to tell the truth. There is somebody behind you in this affair, and I reckon I shall have to blow your head off if you do not tell who it is."

Once more the tough protested there was no one behind him, but Vane cut his words short.

"Say your prayers, for I shall fire when I have counted up to twenty."

Then, in a deliberate manner, he began to count aloud. That was too much for the rascal, and by the time fifteen was reached he cried:

"Say, hole on! I'll tell! I'll tell!"

"All right, spit it out. I have no time to waste, for it is growing dark. Who was it?"

"Will ye let me go ef I tell?"

"Yes; but talk lively. Who was it?"

"It wuz Elegant Ed. I wuz sw'arin' I'd hev revenge on ye w'en he comes up an' says he'd guv me fifty dollars ef I'd salt ye. I felt like saltin' ye, anyhow, so I tuck ther job."

Vane laughed, icily.

"It is about as I thought," fell from his lips. "Elegant Ed will find me a bad man to butt against. As for you, for all of your protests

that you did not mean to kill me, it is plain you did mean just that. You are a miserable red-handed dog, who ought to have your neck stretched, and if you remain in Magic City, I will see that it is stretched. My advice to you is to get out as soon as you know how. Do you see that bend down there?"

"Yep."

"Well, I am going to count twenty once more, and if you are not out of sight, beyond that bend, by the time I finish, I shall practice on you for a target."

"But, my weppins, pard—w'at'll ye do with 'em?"

"I will leave them with Hi Jenks, at the hotel. You can call on him for them. Are you ready to start?"

"Say, Jenks an' I hain't very good frien's. S'pose you—"

But Vane began to count, and the "chief" instantly took to his heels. Before the twenty were counted he had disappeared.

"Now," said Vane, arising, "I will go back to Magic City and Elegant Ed. I have taken a fair look at his cards, and I ought to be able to thwart his game."

The lights were beginning to twinkle from cabin windows when he entered the town. At the hotel he came face to face with the dandy sport of Magic City. Something like an exclamation of surprise, of disgust, escaped Elegant Ed's lips, and Vane smiled sweetly in his face. Then each passed on.

Later that evening, Vane entered the "Golden Hand" Saloon, which was directly across the street from the hotel. He found the place filled with a motley assembly. The bar was doing a rushing business, and the gaming-tables were surrounded by the throng of men who were eager to stake their hard earned-money on the turn of a card.

To some the scene would have been strange and fascinating, but Violet Vane was used to such things. With a lighted cigar between his teeth, he sauntered leisurely down the room till he reached that portion occupied by the gamblers. He kept his dark eyes roving restlessly about till he had taken in everything in the place, and then, although constantly on his guard, he scarcely seemed to notice anything that occurred at his elbow.

Among others, Vane noticed Elegant Ed, the gambler being seated at a table playing cards with a seedy-looking man of uncertain age. The clothes worn by Ed's opponent fitted his person in a slouchy manner and his face was covered by a tangled beard.

Unobserved by the Magic City sharp, Violet Vane took a position where he could watch Ed's every movement.

The game was a quiet one and therefore attracted little attention. Everything was favorable for Elegant Ed to work whatever game he saw fit, as it appeared, without being detected by any of the spectators. Vane well knew the gambler would play some kind of a trick if he found himself matched against a lucky or skillful opponent.

After watching the game a few moments, the Velvet Sport came to the conclusion that the cards were running to the seedy man. This belief was confirmed when the man drew in a pot with a laugh, saying:

"Wal, this is ther fu'st time Seth Slouch ever hed any bit of luck at keards, but he's right on it ter-day, an' don't ye fergit it! Ef this streak keeps on, I'll bu'st ye wide open, pard."

"That is true," confessed Elegant Ed, coolly. "You are having wonderful luck, stranger. I reckon I am no good to-night."

"Now he will try his little snap," thought Vane, and from that moment he watched the gambler's hands still more closely.

In less than than a minute he detected a crooked move.

CHAPTER VI.

THE GAME BLOCKED.

ELEGANT ED was working a sleeve hold-out, but the fellow who had called himself Seth Slouch was playing a square game. Ed drew a pair of kings and an ace, and with the aid of his hold-out "filled" his hand with aces, thus making the strongest "full house" in existence.

Seth Slouch "drew" to a pair of ten-spots.

The Magic City sharp started the ball with a light bet, and Slouch promptly "saw" him and "set" him in return. Then there was some lively betting.

Elegant Ed felt sure he held a hand that would be "good," for it seemed certain the other had drawn to a pair. Of course Slouch could not hold a straight flush or anything of that sort.

"You have good pluck, partner," observed

the gambler, coldly, as Slouch continued to "raise" the pot. "It is possible, however, your pluck is superior to your judgment."

The seedy man laughed.

"Oh, I'm on it!" he declared. "I've jest got er 'tarnal streak of luck, an' I'm goin' ter shove it ter ther eand. I'll tell ye w'at I'll do."

"Well?"

"I'll putt up my hull pile on this han' 'ginst ther same ermount of yourn, then we'll show keards. W'at d'yer say?"

The card-sharp hesitated a moment, then a look of desperate determination passed over his face. He would put up the money and claim a foul if it happened that he was beaten.

"I am agreeable."

"Then it's er go!"

The seedy man produced a roll of bills and counted out nearly fifteen hundred dollars. Deliberately Elegant Ed covered the sum with a similar amount.

"Thar ye hev it!" cried Slouch, excitedly. "Now show up an' we'll see who's ther best feller."

Calmly Elegant Ed turned his cards so the seedy man could see them.

"It is the best full house to be found in the pack," he said. "Have you anything to beat it?"

"You bet yer boots!" laughed Slouch. "How duz them look ter yer eyes?"

Then he displayed his cards, and with dismay the gambler saw four ten spots spread before him!

"They look rich, don't they, pard!" chuckled the seedy man.

The card-sharp turned white, then flushed hotly, a light of anger in his eyes.

"Reckon I scoop ther boodle," and Slouch reached to rake in the pile.

"I reckon not!" retorted Ed, icily, his words being accompanied by the click of a revolver.

"Hands off, or chew lead!"

Slouch started back in apparent amazement.

"W'y, w'at in thunder d'ye mean?" he cried.

"I won thet thar money, didn't I?"

"By a foul."

"It's er derved lie! I played er squar' game!"

Elegant Ed's eyes were blazing with a deadly light. He had determined to secure the money at all hazards.

By this time the attention of the crowd was drawn to the two men, and spectators began to surge around the table. Violet Vane placed himself directly behind the Magic City sharp, although others were careful to keep out of probable pistol range.

"I say you played crooked," declared Ed, grimly.

"An' I say it's er lie!" again retorted the seedy man. "I played a squar' game, an' thar's my keards. Four tens allus beats ary derved kind of er full house you kin scar' up, so I takes ther money."

"Not this evening, stranger. I have the drop and"—reaching out to draw in the amount of the wager—"I also have the boodle."

"Go a little slow there!" advised Violet Vane, as he thrust the cold muzzle of a revolver against Elegant Ed's head just back of the right ear. "I believe I will chip into this little game. I happen to know something about it."

The card-sharp vented a furious exclamation.

"Kindly accommodate me by removing your hands from that money," commanded the Velvet Sport. "Many thanks. That will save me the trouble of blowing off the roof of your shapely head. Now we will come to an understanding."

"Look here!" cried Ed. "What do you mean by this? You are not in this game anyway."

"But I have invited myself to come in. See? It may not be pleasant to you, but it is a way I have."

Then the Magic City sharp appealed to the crowd:

"Gentlemen, are you going to see me robbed in this fashion? It is a put-up game. This money is mine."

"Gentlemen," came deliberately from Vane's lips, "this man claims the pot, but cards talk in this case. There are the two hands before your eyes. One is a full house, the other four tens. Everybody who knows a thing about draw poker knows fours beat a full house always."

"But I claim foul play," insisted the gambler.

"In what way?"

"He did not get those four tens in a fair draw."

"Is—that—so! Well, if you are going to make such a claim as that, I suppose you will submit to have your own sleeves searched?"

The card-sharp paled.

"This is all a trick—a game to rob me!" he

fumed, finding himself fairly cornered. "Some one shall pay dearly for it! I will yet call them to an account!"

"There is no need of getting excited about it," came slowly from Vane's lips. "I fancy this other gentleman stands ready to be searched?"

"You bet!" was Seth Slouch's prompt reply.

"I'm willin' ter be pawed all over."

"Of course you will stand the same test?" and the Velvet Sport addressed Elegant Ed. "You cannot refuse under the circumstances."

"But I do refuse. I see you are bound to beat me anyway. Take the money"—to Slouch—"but you will hear from me again."

"Thankee," nodded the seedy man, as he raked in the pot. "Now I am onter ther kind of a cuss you be, I shell be reddy fer ye 'most any time."

With as much calmness as he could command, Elegant Ed restored his revolver to a pocket and arose from the table. Then he turned and faced the Velvet Sport, a hard, cruel look on his rather handsome face.

"I will not forget you very soon," he said, harshly. "You have stepped into my path, but you shall rue the moment you first saw me! I am a man who never forgets an enemy, and you have shown yourself my enemy."

"Good enough!" smiled Vane. "Now we understand each other, and an open fight is to be preferred to an underhand one. I knew you for an enemy as soon as I saw you. Something told me to look out for you. You hired an assassin to put me out of your way, but he failed."

"It is not true!"

"It is true, and Sledge-hammer Sam is the man."

The Magic City sharp flung out one hand with a gesture of contempt.

"What kind of a story are you trying to hatch up? When I want such a job as that done, I attend to it myself, and it is done in a manner fair and above-board. That is the way I shall dispose of your case if you have not taken yourself out of Magic City within the next twenty-four hours!"

Having uttered this threat, Elegant Ed turned away and left the saloon.

CHAPTER VII.

GUILTY OR NOT.

THAT night Violet Vane took extra precautions against being taken at an advantage by an assassin after he had retired to his room. He knew Elegant Ed was a dangerous man who would pause at nothing to remove an obstacle from his path, and the Velvet Sport had plainly proved himself such an obstacle.

"It would be like him to hire two or three toughs to break into this room and wipe me out," muttered Vane, as he prepared to obtain some sleep. "That is the way such as he usually get rid of their foes. Well, if the thugs come they will be received very cordially."

He looked to his weapons to make sure they were in perfect working order, then placed them where his hands would grasp them at the first alarm. With the revolvers he deposited a knife that had a "business look" about it.

"That will be handy at close quarters," laughed the wearer of violets. "I despise the thing, for it seems to me like an assassin's weapon, but it is necessary to carry it in this section. If there is anything I dread it is the thought of being cut with a knife. It does not seem half so bad to think of being plinked with a bullet. But, when a fellow is crowded, a knife is worth more than a dozen revolvers."

He was right.

Vane lay down, determined to "sleep with one eye open," as it were. He fully anticipated a call from the hired assassins of the Magic City sharp, but he was to be happily disappointed. The night passed quietly away and he was not disturbed.

Despite the fact that he had retired at a late hour, the Velvet Sport arose bright and early and took a walk in the clear bracing air before breakfast. He rambled far enough from the border of the little town to find a fresh bunch of violets, and when he returned to the hotel, they were pinned upon the lapel of his coat, the dew still glistening upon them.

Vane looked as neat and fresh as one could wish, for there was a barber connected with the Bang-Up Hotel, and the sport was the "tonorial artist's" first customer that day.

The barber seemed inclined to talk—a strange thing for barbers!—and Vane skillfully led him to speak of Daniel Marden and his mysterious death.

"I tell you," confidentially declared the bar-

ber, lowering his voice as if he did not wish to be overheard, "there is something powerful singular about that!"

"What do you mean?" asked Vane.

"I mean it seems queer such a man as Dan Marden should shoot himself. There was no reason in the world that I can see why he should have done so."

"And yet he did?"

"Well, I am not so sure. I believe there are a few in Magic who have their doubts about it."

"But he was found with a bullet in his brain."

"That may have been the work of other hands than his."

"Ha! Do you think he was murdered?"

"Well, I am not willing to say what I think; but it was only yesterday I heard something that set me to thinking powerful hard."

"Yes?"

The barber coughed, hesitated, then went on: "It has been a wonder who could have had a motive in putting Dan Marden out of the way, if it was not suicide; but I believe I have struck something worth investigating."

"You think you have found a motive for the deed?"

"Perhaps so."

"Would you mind letting me in?"

"Well, I do not want to throw suspicions on any one who is not guilty, but I have heard he had trouble with his mine superintendent only two days before he died."

"That is important, if true. Who was his superintendent?"

"A young fellow by the name of Bruce Weldon."

"Where is he now?"

"Here in Magic. He gave out he left Marden, but I reckon he was discharged."

"What is he doing?"

"Nothing that I know of."

Vane made a mental determination to see Bruce Weldon and have a talk with him, and after breakfast he set out to find the ex-superintendent. The task did not prove a very severe one, but, to the sport's surprise, he was favorably impressed by the young man's appearance.

The Velvet Sport represented himself as being a speculator looking for an investment in Magic City, and he gave the impression that there was a syndicate of capitalists at his back. In this way he led Weldon to speak of the Little Marion Mine.

"I have been informed you were Daniel Marden's superintendent?" was an interrogative inflection.

"I was, sir," was the young man's reply, as his brown eyes met the sport's black orbs squarely.

"Then it is possible you can tell me something about that piece of property?"

Weldon shook his head with a faint smile.

"You have come to the wrong party for information. Mr. Marden often requested me to remain silent upon the very point you desire information about."

"But Daniel Marden is dead now."

"That makes no difference with me; his daughter is in possession of the property."

"But I hear you were discharged by Marden."

"It is not true."

"Ah!"

"I resigned my position."

"Oh, that was it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then there was some trouble between you and your employer?"

Bruce Weldon scowled a bit, as if he scarcely fancied being led to talk about that, but he answered:

"No, sir, there was no trouble."

Vane scarcely knew what question to put next, but the ex-superintendent solved the problem by adding:

"There might have been some trouble, but when Mr. Marden began to complain I promptly resigned my position. He thought he knew of a better man to fill my place, and informed him he was at liberty to fill it as he chose. But, if I am not mistaken, I know the man who was at the bottom of the whole affair. He plotted to oust me, and he succeeded; but he has not heard the last of Bruce Weldon. I have my eye on him, and he may yet find himself with a rope around his neck."

Vane was curious to know who this man was, but he felt it would not be prudent to question Weldon on that line. Still he believed in boldness, and he suddenly asked:

"Do you think Daniel Marden committed suicide?"

The young man started, gazed searchingly at

the sport, pulling nervously at his brown mustache, then sent a question in return:

"What makes you ask that?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I have heard it hinted that he was murdered."

"Who hinted such a thing?"

"More than one since I struck Magic City yesterday."

"I thought every one believed in the suicide theory," muttered Weldon, speaking more to himself than to Vane. "They all seem to think he killed himself—all who have talked to me. Can it be—"

He stopped abruptly and glanced swiftly into the sport's face.

"I should fancy you are more interested about this point than you are concerning the mine," he asserted.

"It is possible," acknowledged the wearer of the violets, his keen eyes fixed almost accusingly on the other.

"Then you are a detective?"

Vane fancied there was an expression of alarm in the question.

"No."

"No?"

"I have simply taken an interest in the affair. I am not an officer of the law. But, if I am not mistaken, there is good material for a detective to work upon in this case."

Weldon did not immediately reply, but he finally said:

"You may be right. I have thought as much; but Miss Marden does not seem to think there was anything crooked about the affair."

"Then you have spoken to her about it?"

"Yes."

"Did you mention such a thing as murder?"

"I hinted at it."

"How did she receive it?"

"It seemed to distress her very much, but she did not appear to think it was possible her father had been murdered."

"From your words, I infer you consider it quite possible."

Again the ex-superintendent was silent for a moment, then he lifted his eyes till they were met by Vane's, and with apparent frankness he asserted:

"I do think it possible."

Once more Vane resolved on a bold stroke, and fixing a piercing gaze upon Weldon, he said:

"Do you know there are those who think you may know more about Mr. Marden's death than you care to tell?"

Bruce reeled back as if struck squarely in the face, growing pale to the lips. When he attempted to speak he seemed to be choked, and he grasped at his throat with his hands. A thrill passed over the Velvet Sport as he witnessed this display of emotion.

"God!" cried Weldon, hoarsely. Then he sprang forward and caught Violet Vane by the shoulders, grating harshly:

"Is that true? Speak out! Do not dare play any tricks on me! Has any one so much as hinted I had anything to do with Dan Marden's death? Speak, I say!"

The sport was as cool as you please.

"Now what is the use of getting excited," he began. "It will not—"

"Excited!" echoed Bruce Weldon. "Who would not get excited with such a suspicion hovering over them? But if you are trying a trick on me, I will make it a sorry joke for you! I am not a man to be fooled with!"

"Evidently not. But you will not gain anything by losing control of your nerves. Keep cool."

"Cool—cool! Is a man who finds himself suspected of murder apt to keep cool? Look here! I want you to tell me just what you have heard."

"What if I decline?"

"Then I will force it from your lips!"

Vane laughed.

"You might find you had tackled a large job. But, if you are innocent, there is no reason why we should have trouble."

"If I! I would like to face the man who dared accuse me of such a thing! You must tell me what you have heard!"

"I hardly fancy there is any compulsion about it, but I do not mind telling you. It is very insignificant, for it was a simple hint that, as you had trouble with Marden, you might know more about his death than you cared to tell."

"And who said this?"

"I trust you will pardon me if I do not call any names."

At first, Weldon seemed determined to know who it was, but when he saw Vane would not tell, he dropped that point.

"This is the first time I have dreamed I was suspected of such a thing," he said. "Now I see there is work ahead. I have thought I would investigate the affair and seek to discover if Mr. Marden really committed suicide; now my mind is made up to do so. If he was murdered, the wretch who did the foul work shall be brought to justice!"

"That talk has the right ring."

"I mean it! I shall turn detective on my own account."

"I wish you success."

"I shall succeed if such a thing is possible. If the man was murdered, his assassin shall be given little time to cover his tracks. I think I recognize the handiwork of a foe in these suspicious hints against me, and that foe—Well, Elegant Ed, the foxy gambler, shall find me a hard man to down!"

CHAPTER VIII.

A SHRIEK.

WHEN Violet Vane parted from Bruce Weldon he was in a decidedly puzzled state of mind, for he could not arrive at a conclusion concerning the young man. Some of Weldon's acts had seemed like those of a guilty man, while others—the majority—made the sport think the ex-superintendent innocent.

"If he had any hand in the murder of Daniel Marden—and I now believe the mine-owner was murdered—he is a skillful actor, to say the least. Once or twice I detected something like a look of guilt on his face, but the most of the time his eyes met mine squarely and frankly. I must watch him."

"This afternoon I will visit Marion Marden—if she is Marion Marden. It scarcely seems possible such a beautiful girl can be anything but honest, but I am not the person to be easily deceived. She has found a way into my heart, for I dreamed of her blue eyes last night; but if she is an adventuress, I will cast her out, even though it may cost me more than a common struggle. I could love such a girl as she seems to be!"

The remainder of the forenoon Vane spent in wandering about the place, taking mental notes.

Near noon the stage came in and stopped in front of the Bang-Up Hotel.

The Velvet Sport was one of the throng that witnessed its arrival.

About the first passenger to appear was a tall, awkward-looking old fellow, whose long legs and gawky appearance brought smiles to the faces of many who saw him for the first time. In one hand he carried a large, old-fashioned carpet-bag, that seemed stuffed full.

"Wal, by gosh!" he drawled, stretching himself almost as soon as he reached the ground. "I don't know as I keer abaout ridin' more'n three or four millyon mile in that ole waggon! I'm all crampy from bein' doubled up so munny times. I tell you, folkses, my laigs wur never built fer conveyance in sech snug quarters, an' that's er fac', ur my name hain't Ole Bob Shucks, of Mizzury."

Having thus expressed himself, the old fellow ascended the steps and entered the hotel, brushing against Violet Vane as he did so.

The two exchanged meaning glances.

Thirty minutes later they were together in Vane's room.

It was plain the two were not strangers, but they had no desire to be known as friends in Magic City.

Near the middle of the afternoon Vane made his way to the most imposing residence in the little town. As he ascended the steps, the door was opened and a young man appeared.

Vane saw before him a rather rakish-looking individual of twenty-two or three, whose face indicated he had lived a decidedly fast life and whose clothes were of the sort best designated as "loud." This person was smoking an exceedingly black cigar and had his stiff hat cocked over one eye in a "tough" manner.

"Hello!" he exclaimed, as his face rested on Vane.

"Hello!" retorted the sport.

"Who are you?" saucily asked the young man of the black cigar.

"The same to yourself," flashed Vane, resolved not to be outdone in impudence.

The young man scowled.

"Seems to me you're sassy."

"That is what I was thinking about you."

For a moment it seemed doubtful whether the young fellow would fight or laugh, but he finally decided to do the latter.

"Say!" he exclaimed, surveying Vane from head to feet; "I like your style! You're a Jim!"

Reckon you're something of a sport? Well, that's my lay, though to tell the honest truth, I'm not getting rich at it. First I'm up, then I'm down. In the business a man is rich one day, poor the next and poorer the next. What's your handle?"

"I am called Violet Vane."

"Oh, a fancy cog! Well, shake! I am Mark Marden, and this is the ranch that belonged to my dad before he turned toes up to the daisies. Maybe you know all about that, as you were coming here. I just struck town this morning. Didn't hear of the governor's demise till three days ago. Was down in New Mex then, but humped it hot-foot, you bet. Calling to see any one?"

But Vane was so astonished he could not reply at once. So this was Daniel Marden's son, so long believed to be dead?

"Calling to see any one?" repeated Mark Marden.

"Yes—yes," stammered Vane. "I was calling to see Miss Marden."

The young man scowled a bit, but said, with apparent carelessness:

"Oh, it's sis! Well, she is in. She's grown to be a stunner since I saw her last. Hope you'll have a pleasant call. See you later. So long, old man."

With this he descended the steps, leaving Vane to ring.

The bell was answered by Marion herself, and she greeted him warmly. He glanced searchingly at her face, and made a discovery.

She had been weeping!

Although pains had been taken to conceal all trace of tears, there was a suspicious redness about her eyes.

The sport followed her into the parlor, which he found was luxuriously furnished for that part of the country, and in a short time they were seated *tete-a-tete*.

"I am so glad you came!" exclaimed the girl, impulsively, her face growing warm with pleasure. "I was afraid you would forget."

"I never forget when my word is pledged to a lady," replied Vane. "You may rest assured I was glad to come."

Her eyes fell before his earnest gaze.

"I see your brother has arrived."

She started.

"My brother? Oh, yes!"

She seemed strangely confused for a moment, then she added:

"You must have met him?"

"I did at the door. You were probably greatly surprised to see him, for I hear he was supposed dead."

"Yes, it was a surprise," came slowly from her lips, as she nervously twined her fingers about each other. "He has changed so I scarcely knew him at first."

Vane could not help thinking the change had not been for the better, and to his mind that was a possible explanation of her tears.

For a long time they talked of various subjects, the girl proving herself a charming conversationalist. It did not take the sport long to discover she was well informed, but this seemed to rob her of none of her bewitching air. Indeed, with each passing moment he fell more and more under the influence of the spell the beautiful girl unconsciously cast over him. From books and authors he led the talk to other things, and after a time he turned it upon herself.

Up to that moment, while they were talking of foreign subjects, the girl had seemed quite at ease; but as soon as they were drawn by the sport's subtle craft to speak of herself and her past life, she began to grow uneasy. This was not lost to Vane's keen eyes.

"I cannot understand it," he thought. "She seems so frank and honest that I am almost sure she is not an adventuress, yet there is some secret about her life. How am I to get at it without being rude?"

That was a difficult question to answer.

He turned the talk upon the mine.

"I went over and took a look at the mouth of the shaft this forenoon," he laughed. "Everything seems booming there now."

"Yes; but it is a horrid place! I visited it once, and that was quite enough for me."

"Who is conducting your father's business, for there seems to have been no break caused by his death?"

"He had it arranged so everything should go on if anything happened to him."

"Ah!" thought Vane. "That surely looks like contemplated suicide. It may be Daniel Marden killed himself after all."

The girl arose and passed across the floor to a window. It seemed like the act of one who was too nervous to remain in her seat.

"Poor papa!" she sighed, chokingly. "He has not been right since mother died, although it was a secret he managed to keep from the world. He was troubled with his head. He wrote—me—that—"

She paused as if choking, turned her eyes to Vane in an appealing manner. He saw her become very white. She put out her hands and tried to speak, finally succeeding in gasping:

"I can't! I can't! Forgive me for—"

She started as if to return to her chair, but staggered blindly, causing Vane to spring to his feet and assist her to the seat.

"What is it?" he anxiously asked, bending over her. "You are so pale! What can I do?"

"Nothing, nothing!" she panted, plainly struggling to regain her composure. "Oh, what will you think of me? I know not what the matter is! It must be speaking of—of—him!"

"That is it!" was the thought which passed through his head. "It was a faintspell brought about by speaking of her father. Poor girl! She is dreadfully shaken!"

His genuine anxiety was apparent in the way he hung over her, and the look in his dark eyes. She saw this, and a feeling of joy—a wild thrill of delight—passed over her.

"He loves me!" flashed through her mind. "I can read it in his face—in his midnight eyes! And I—I love him! I love him!"

With this thought the color came back swiftly to her cheeks. He still held one of her hands, which he had caught as he assisted her to the chair, and he felt her fingers trembling in his grasp.

With all the impulsiveness of his warm nature, he lifted the slender hand to his lips and pressed a kiss upon it. It was a rash and thoughtless act, and he realized his folly the moment it was done, but there was no time to back out then.

With a little cry of amazement, she snatched her fingers away, springing to her feet with a quick return of strength.

"Mr. Howard!"

His face became crimson with dismay.

"I—I beg your pardon!" he stammered. "I should have controlled myself more. But now it is done, it cannot be helped. I assure you I meant no indignity! It was an act controlled by my feelings and not by my reason. I beg you not to be offended!"

She stood in an uncertain attitude before him, seeming almost angry, yet apparently unable to resist his appeal.

"We are almost strangers," she murmured. "It was only yesterday we met."

"That is true, but yesterday seems weeks ago. You must remember that we are in the West, and here the people are not bound by such iron rules of society as control everything in the East. Won't you forgive me this time?"

A soft smile crept over her face and her chin quivered in that manner he thought so charming.

"I suppose I shall have to—this time," she said. "But you—"

At that moment a muffled cry like the shrill scream of a woman in a distant part of the house came faintly to their ears.

Vane uttered an exclamation of astonishment and the girl turned pale once more.

CHAPTER IX.

OLD BOB IS BELLIGERENT.

"WHAT was that?"

Violet Vane asked the question, but for some moments the girl did not reply. At length she answered:

"It sounded like a cry of fear or pain."

"It surely did," agreed the sport; "and it was uttered by a woman."

"Yes."

"It seemed to come from below."

"In that case it must have been the cook. I will go see what has happened."

She hastened out of the room, and the door gave a strange click as it closed behind her.

"That was strange," muttered Vane. "That cry seemed to cut me like a keen knife. It sounded like an appeal for aid. And Miss Marden's manner is strange. By George! I know not what to think! I feel sure I have struck a mystery, but I am almost afraid to investigate. If it should turn out she is an adventurer—great heavens!"

With a gesture of horror, he glided softly to the door through which the girl had vanished; but when he tried it, it refused to open at his touch.

It was locked!

"That looks bad—bad!" he muttered, a look of pain on his face. "She was careful that the door should be secure behind her. Can it be

she suspects I have an interest in this strange case? Things have a black look!"

Nervously he paced the carpeted floor.

"It is possible the girl is an impostor, and it may be that cry was uttered by the genuine Marion Marden, who is a captive in this very house! The thought is horrible! Those blue eyes—that perfect mouth—those pearly teeth! By Jove! I am in love with that girl!"

He struck his hands together, and then seemed to suddenly become cool. When the girl returned she found him calmly seated on a chair.

"It was nothing," she laughed, but he fancied the merriment was forced. "The cook was frightened by a mouse, that was all."

He seemed to believe her words, and the matter passed without further comment, the even tenor of conversation being again resumed.

From that time till he left the house Vane carefully avoided speaking of anything that could give the girl a thrill of pain. He was under the spell of her bewitching ways and musical voice, and when at last he left, it was with reluctance he did so.

She gave him a parting hand-shake at the door, and he clung to her soft, warm fingers a little longer than was absolutely necessary.

Once clear of the house, a feeling of dejection settled upon him.

"If she proves to be anything but the noble girl she appears, I shall curse the day I ever saw her!" he muttered, bitterly. "It may be I am making a fool of myself, but if I am, I cannot help it. It is a pleasant thing to be a fool sometimes. But I am not blind. I am going to know the truth if it takes a wheel! Once I was tempted to show her the note I found on the trail, but my better judgment prevented. It is possible she could explain everything with a word; and it is possible I might give my game away to my worst enemies by showing it."

There was one thing he resolved to find out, and as soon as possible, he began making inquiries about the cook who the girl said had been frightened by a mouse.

The result was astounding.

He learned the cook was a man!

"That looks like a nigger in the wood-pile!" he thought. "A man is not going to be frightened of a mouse and scream in that manner; besides that, the cry was that of a female. It looks black, black!"

"And there is this young fellow who claims to be Daniel Marden's son; I am not able to say I like his appearance. I wonder if it is generally known he has turned up."

He soon found the appearance of Mark Marden was a common topic of conversation. Then he set out to find the young man.

"I will draw him into conversation and see how he will talk," muttered the amateur detective.

After visiting several places, he learned the young man had been seen in the Golden Hand Saloon, and he turned his steps in that direction. As he crossed the threshold, he heard a high-pitched voice saying:

"That's what I kem heur fer, ter lick ther stuffin' out that galoot who calls hisself Violet Vane. He won about seven hundred dollars of my hard-earned money at keards in Coffin City, then he skipped. Old Bob Shucks is a kinder peaceable critter, but I'm gosh darned ef I kin stan' ter be robbed! I tellye what, I don't think much of these fellers as goes around over the kentry all rigged aout in their fine togs skinnin' folks' money at keards. You wait tell I get my han's on this Violet Vane, an' you see if I don't warm him up in— Great gosh!"

The long-legged old fellow known as Old Bob Shucks was the speaker, and he nearly fell over with apparent consternation when he saw Violet Vane before him. Old Bob's listeners were the loafers in the saloon, among whom were Elegant Ed and the flashy youth who proclaimed himself Daniel Marden's son.

Vane regarded Old Bob sternly.

"Were you speaking of me?" he demanded.

"N-n-no!" stammered the Missourian. "It must have bin some other feller." But, as he heard a snicker go round, he made a sudden change, blustering:

"Yes, I wur speakin' of you! I hain't goin' ter deny it. You are ther very feller!"

"What were you saying?"

"That you are ther gosh blamdest cheat outer jail, by thutter!"

"Are you aware you may have to back up your talk?"

"Wal, I don't keer fer that, I'm able ter back it up ur back it down. I know what I'm about."

As Vane seemed decidedly cool and unaggressive, the old man began to prance around, wav-

ing his arms and trying to look very savage. He presented a comical aspect, and many of the spectators laughed outright. Vane smiled.

"Grin, darn ye, grin!" cried Bob, shaking a knotty fist under the sport's nose. "You beat me aout of seven hundred dollars in Coffin City, dash ye!"

"That is not true."

"Do ye mean ter say I lie?"

"If you say I ever beat you out of seven cents—yes."

Immediately the old man peeled off his coat and spat on his hands.

"That duz settle it!" he squawked.

"Go fer him, ole coon!" shouted one.

"Down him!" yelled another.

"We will bet on you!" put in a third.

The crowd was anxious to see the sport, and so they urged Old Bob on.

"Oh, I'll do him, I wull!" nodded the old man, and then he made a rush for the smiling dandy.

Vane did not attempt to avoid the charge, and in a moment the two men were clinched. Then there was a howl, a pair of long legs waved wildly in the air, and a crash followed.

Old Bob found himself flat on his back on the floor, while Vane leaned against the bar and smiled.

"Wal, by gosh!" mumbled the fallen man, as he slowly sat up and then struggled to his feet, rubbing his back. "I didn't hev time ter git holt."

"Go fer him again!" shouted a voice.

But Old Bob shook his head.

"Not now," he said. "My back's purty nigh broke. But I'll git at ye ag'in, you velvet shark! I want ye ter understan' you can't jump on the ole man in this way an' live ter brag 'bout it. I'll fix ye w'en ye hain't lookin' fer me."

With that threat he turned and walked slowly out of the saloon, still keeping his hands pressed upon his back.

CHAPTER X.

A TRAGEDY.

WHEN Old Bob Shucks had disappeared Vane looked around for the young fellow in search of whom he entered the saloon, but to his surprise, he discovered both Mark Marden and Elegant Ed had disappeared. During the scuffle they had left the saloon by the back way.

"That looks suspicious," thought the sport. "They both departed at the same time, and so it is probable they are acquainted. If the self-styled Mark Marden is on familiar terms with that shark I will guarantee there is something crooked about the fellow. It must be they thought I did not see them when I entered, else they would not have slipped out in company."

He purchased some cigars at the bar, but in putting them in his case he extracted one of his own and lighted that, for he had no fancy to smoke the villainous weeds to be obtained in such a place. He was decidedly particular about the kind of a cigar he smoked.

As he was standing by the bar Seth Slouch entered the saloon. The seedy man espied Vane and immediately came forward, holding out his hand.

"Pard, you're er Jim!" he cried, with enthusiasm. "You skipped las' night afore I hed a chance ter thank ye fer chippin' in jest as ye did an' savin' my boodle. Thet's doin' a galoot a great turn! Ther critter'd swiped me ef you hedn't exposed his trick, fer I didn't see him work ther game. I'm jest glad ter grip yer fin!"

The seedy man shook Vane's hand in a hearty manner.

"Tain't uvery day I play poker," he went on; "an' so I hain't posted on all ther skin games. I play a squar' game, I do. I reckon you must hev handled ther keards some yerself ter tumble ter sech er trick?"

"Well, I have played some," smiled the wearer of the violets.

"I knowed it! Say, hev er drink with me? Come poison yerself."

"You will have to excuse me; I do not drink."

"W'at?"

Slouch seemed almost paralyzed with amazement.

"That is straight goods," smiled the sport.

"Wal, you're er good one! An' you're one of ther boys too! I sw'ar!"

When the seedy man had gotten over his astonishment somewhat, he drew Vane toward one of the card-tables, and the two sat down.

"I want ter ax er few questions," said Slouch. "Ye see I'm er stranger in this yere camp."

"So am I."

"Is thet so? Wal, wal! Then mebbe you can't tell me northin'. I wuz goin' ter ax 'bout

"er young feller in checker-board pants as I saw slippin' out at the back door jest afore I kem in."

"You must mean Mark Marden."

"I 'low that's w'at he calls hisself. Him an' I hed er leetle muss ter-day an' I upshot his apple-cart. He made fun of my togs, an' w'en I shook er fist-full of bills in his face he snickered an' said he c'u'd cover ev'ry cent I hed with er ten-dollar bill. He said he wuz ole Dan Marden's son, an' ole Dan owned the biggest part of this town afore he kicked the bucket."

"Well, he was right in regard to Mr. Marden's financial condition, whether he is the genuine Mark Marden or not."

"Then you think mebbe he hain't straight goods?"

But Vane was too cautious to freely express his opinion.

"Have I said so?"

"No; but ye kind of guv thet impression. Ef you do think so, I'm 'lowin' ye are right."

"What makes you say that?"

"Wal, I've seen this feller afore I saw him in Magic City."

"So?"

"Yep; an' I hev seen Mark Marden too!"

Vane uttered an exclamation,

"Hal! thet starts ye!" chuckled Slouch, rubbing his hands together and looking delighted. "I reckoned it w'u'd. I kind of surmised you hed an intrust in this yere 'fair, fer I saw ye go inter Dan Marden's house ter-day, an' I saw ye meet ther checker-board feller on ther steps."

"Are you honest in saying you knew the genuine Mark Marden?"

"Yep."

"When and where?"

"Well, not so very long ergo."

"Where?"

"Down in New Mex."

"But how do you know it was Dan Marden's son—the Dan Marden of Magic City?"

"Cause I heerd him brag 'bout his dad an' how rich he wuz. Said he run away from ther ole gent an' he wuzn't goin' back tell he wuz rich too, though I'm derved ef I saw much chance fer him ter ever be w'ith shucks he wuz so shiftless. He said his dad hed moved roun' sence he run erway, but he hed kep' track of him an' he wuz owner of er mine in this very camp!"

The Velvet Sport regarded the man closely, feeling somewhat doubtful about the truth of the statement. A sudden suspicion flashed through Vane's mind: was it not possible Seth Slouch was an accomplice of Elegant Ed and the card game all a trick to blind the spectators' eyes? He had known of such games being played successfully, and the more he thought of this one the stronger became his belief that Seth Slouch was not just what he claimed. The man's story about Mark Marden did not seem a very straight one; but Vane resolved not to let the seedy man know he was suspected.

"Then you mean to say you know this person who represents himself as Daniel Marden's son—not the genuine Mark Marden?"

"Thet's whatever," nodded Slouch. "Down in New Mex he called hisself Burt Bishop."

"Ah?"

"Yep; an' he an' ther ginnowine Mark Marden wuz pards."

"That is interesting information."

"It's straight, too."

"What became of the genuine Mark Marden?"

"Thar, now you hev axed suthin' as puzzled White Lightnin' Bar fer some time. The ginnowine Mark Marden suddenly disappeared, an' nobody seemed ter know w'at bekem o' him. Even Burt Bishop declared he didn't know. He never turned up in thet camp arter thet."

"Um! What do you think?"

Slouch leaned across the table and lowered his voice.

"Foul play!" he hissed. "Thet is jest w'at I think."

"You believe Mark Marden was—"

Vane paused, and the seedy man declared:

"I believe Burt Bishop c'u'd tell w'at happened ter Mark Marden."

Vane understood that what the man had told was important if true, but how was he to be sure it was not all a crafty invention to entrap him?

Slouch seemed to read the doubt expressed by the sport's face, for he said, with great earnestness:

"Thet is honest Injun, pard. Burt Bishop skun out of White Lightnin' Bar shortly arter thet an' nobody knowed whar he hed gone. I didn't see him arterwards tell I met him ter-day."

"Didn't he know you?"

The seedy man shook his head.

"Ye see I hev let my w'iskers grow," he explained.

Vane regarded the man's beard closely and made a surprising discovery.

It was false!

The Velvet Sport was obliged to feign a cough to disguise the exclamation that forced itself from his lips, but in a moment he was as cool and unconcerned in manner as before. But the discovery seemed to confirm his suspicions. The seedy man was playing some kind of a game, and what could it be if he was not an accomplice of Elegant Ed and the self-styled Mark Marden. It looked as if the story of White Lightning Bar was a myth invented for the occasion.

"That explains how he failed to recognize you," came calmly from the sport's lips. "If you are right in believing this fellow to be the Burt Bishop you speak of, there must be some kind of a crooked game afoot; but it seems that Marion Marden has recognized the fellow as her brother."

A strange light passed through Seth Slouch's eyes.

"Marion Marden!" he repeated, with something like a bitter laugh. "There may be two Marion Mardens in ther kentry! Did ye ever think of thet?"

Vane seemed greatly surprised, and pretended he did not catch the man's meaning.

"I reckon I hev talked enough," nodded the disguised man. "It will set ye thinkin', ef you hain't bin thunkin' already. I hev said this ter you because I reckoned you wuz w'ite. Thar is goin' ter be an overturn in this yere town afore long, you hear me! W'en thet time comes, you want ter be on ther right side, fer ther fur will fly, you bet. Keep yer eyes open fer developments. So long."

With this advice, the seedy man arose and left the table. Straight out of the saloon he walked, not once turning to look back, and the sport's eyes followed him till he disappeared.

"Well," thought Vane, "I am getting more and more puzzled. Who and what is that man? That is a question I would like to have answered. That he is not what he appears is very plain now that I have discovered he is in disguise. He is up to some kind of game, but what kind of a game is it? I can scarcely fix upon the belief that he is in league with Elegant Ed, although I know there is a possibility such is the case. If he is not, then he must be an enemy of the smooth shark and the fellow who claims to be Mark Marden."

"It is possible there is no deception about this affair, for if the young man is not Mark Marden, then it cannot be possible the girl is the genuine Marion."

"Oh, it is the worst infernal tangle I ever struck! Instead of getting ahead, I am becoming more and more puzzled. The case is growing too complicated; it would puzzle a Vidocq. Who killed Dan Marden? What has become of Marion Marden? Who is the girl who pretends to be Marion? What relation does the self-styled Mark bear to her? Is Bruce Weldon concerned? How is Elegant Ed connected with the case? Who is Seth Slouch? What—"

"But what is the use to go on? Those are not half the questions that are troubling me!"

He arose, relighted the cigar which he had allowed to go out while talking with Slouch, then left the saloon.

"I believe I will find Bruce Weldon and have another talk with him," he muttered.

But he was unable to find the ex-superintendent.

Vane spent the rest of the afternoon in studying the situation, and trying to set things aright in his own mind, but the more he puzzled over it the more mixed and uncertain he became. Near sunset he wandered away into the hills, to be alone with his thoughts.

The sun had gone down, and he was returning to the town, when his attention was attracted by the sound of voices. A moment later he found himself looking down into a little hollow where the shadows of night had already begun to gather.

Within the hollow two men stood face to face, and angry words were passing between them. One of them Vane recognized as the person known in Magic City as Mark Marden, and he was speaking.

"Why have you followed her here, Jack Corker?" he angrily demanded. "You know she is tired and sick of you! You forced your attentions on her in the first place!"

"Bah!" cried the other, a rakish-looking young fellow, who was an utter stranger to

Vane. "She is a flirt! She gave me encouragement at first, then treated me like a dog!"

"You lie! She only used you decent, that was all the encouragement she ever gave you."

"You'd better go slow!" growled Corker, with a threatening gesture. "I hain't got no love for you, and I won't stand everything from ye!"

Marden laughed, sneeringly.

"Bosh, Corker! You have not the pluck of a kitten! I know you of old, for we have been concerned in more than one deal! Bottle up, old man, and simmer down! The best thing you can do is get out of these parts lively."

"And leave the field to you! Hanged if I will!"

"Then you will get into trouble. She says you fired at her, and your bullet cut the bridle-rein of the horse she was riding. If you ever try that again, Jack Corker, I won't leave enough of you for a funeral! You must be crazy!"

"I love her—"

"Bah! Is that the way you show your affection?"

"I have sworn she shall never marry any other man."

"The more fool you! She is going to marry me."

"Never!"

"But she is, just the same."

"She does not love you!"

"Love me! Ha! ha! ha! Well, I can't say she does; but Tom has said she shall marry me."

"He would force her to it?"

"Oh, I do not think it will be necessary to force her."

With an attempt at calmness, Jack Corker declared:

"You shall never have her!"

"You will not be able to prevent it."

"I will kill her first!"

Marden's hand fell on the other's shoulder, and he spoke with terrible earnestness:

"If you ever harm her, it will be better for you to blow out your own brains the next instant! I will make you rue the day you were born!"

Corker struck the hand from his shoulder, uttering a savage snarl.

"Curse you!" he grated. "You will not be alive then! I have stood enough from you, and I will finish you right here!"

A knife glistened in his hand!

"Keep off!" cried Mark Marden, retreating a step, his hand falling toward his hip-pocket. "I will bore you if you try it!"

"No you won't, for I will not give you time!"

Then the man with the knife leaped forward.

Marden tried to draw the revolver, but the hammer caught and he was not successful. With remarkable nimbleness, he avoided the rush of the infuriated man, then he wheeled and his fist shot out from the shoulder.

The blow caught Jack Corker behind the right ear, hurling him face downward on the ground. The fallen man uttered a horrible groan and lay still.

"The fool!" exclaimed Mark Marden, assuming a position of defense and looking for the man to rise.

Corker did not stir.

"Well, I must have hit him a swynder!" muttered the victor.

Then he bent down and turned the other over. A cry of amazement and horror escaped his lips.

Jack Corker had fallen on his own knife, and the blade was driven through his heart!

"My God!" gasped Marden. "He is dead!"

Then he turned and fled the spot, quickly disappearing in the gathering darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

VANE'S ALLY GETS A POINT.

THE Velvet Sport had witnessed the tragedy, but the fatal part of the affair had occurred too quickly for him to have interfered had he been thus inclined.

"That fellow must not get away!" he thought, as Mark Marden hurried from the spot. "With the aid of this little occurrence, I may be able to force a confession from his lips."

He started in pursuit of the fleeing man, but fear seemed to lend wings to Marden's feet, and the darkness surely favored him. Vane was a swift runner, but the other succeeded—quite unconsciously—in giving him the slip.

"Well," muttered the sport, as he halted on the outskirts of the camp, "that fellow has got away for the present, and I have lost a grand opportunity. When I see him next it is possible he will have regained his composure, then it will

be useless to attempt to frighten anything like the truth from him. The other fellow was killed in self-defense. He was armed, while the one he assaulted was bare-handed. It was by a stroke of fortune that the knife slew its owner."

The conversation which the sport had overheard settled one point in his mind: The ones he knew as Mark and Marion Marden were not brother and sister!

"The game is crooked, that is sure now. There is no longer a doubt in my mind about that. I am sorry—sorry on account of that girl! And so he is to marry her! If I am not mistaken, she cares nothing for him, but there is a third party in the case who is compelling her to marry this fellow. That explains the traces of tears I detected about her eyes when I called on her this afternoon. And he was just leaving her then. She is entangled in some kind of a net from which she cannot escape, and I—I am going to help her out. When the crash comes, as it surely will, the others will find themselves in a tight box—a very tight box!"

"I believe the real Marion Marden is a captive in the house that is rightfully hers, and it was her cry that I heard. She said the cry came from the lips of the cook, who was frightened by a mouse. Oh, that those red lips should tell a falsehood! But, no matter what she is, I love her still!"

He fully understood his own folly, but love does not listen to reason.

With bowed head, he walked onward into the town.

By this time it had grown quite dark.

As he was passing a small cabin, a man leaped suddenly around a corner and struck at his breast. He saw something bright glisten in the fellow's hand, and, by a rare stroke of luck, he parried the blow.

The next moment he sent the fellow reeling to the ground.

As the man went down his head struck heavily on a stone, and he lay still, making no offer to arise.

"Knocked out with a single stroke!" half laughed the Velvet Sport, bending over the would-be assassin. "I wonder who he is? Ah—Samuel!"

It was Sledge-hammer Sam.

"Instead of taking my advice and getting out, he remained and watched for a chance to finish me. Well, this is the second time he has met defeat; I wonder if he will try it again?"

He turned away, leaving the unconscious man where he fell.

Vane went straight to the hotel and ate a hearty supper. Then he ascended to his room. Lighting the candle allowed him, he glanced around.

Near the center of the floor lay a small stone, around which a slip of paper was wrapped and made fast with a bit of string.

Vane laughed as he saw this.

"Ah, the old man is at work! Well, let's see what he has to say."

He removed the paper from the stone and found there was writing upon it. Carefully smoothing it out, he sat down and with great difficulty, deciphered the following message, written in a wretched hand with a lead-pencil.

"PARD:—I am jest foolin' them in Grate shape. I hav got some pints and (He right Gal is a Prizner. They Think I am down on On you and I bet I git Onto the hole Bizness. mark Marden hain't Mark marden no more then whut I Bee. D. D."

Vane laughed aloud when he had read this note.

"That old fellow is a shrewd one!" he exclaimed. "Taken together, we make a great detective team. But look at the spelling of this! By Jove! that is unique and original!"

Then he held the slip of paper in the flame of the candle and allowed it to burn to ashes.

"It is best to cover all traces," muttered the sport. "I know they suspect I have taken an interest in this case, but I do not reckon they dream I have an ally, and I do not want them to discover the fact."

A few moments later he left the room and descended to the street.

"Now what shall I do?" was the question he put to himself. "I am growing impatient to crowd this affair to a close. If Marion Marden is a captive, the hours must drag wearily for her. I wish I might get into that house and go through it. I would soon discover if she is confined there."

At that moment he noticed two men entering the Golden Hand Saloon.

"Elegant Ed and Sledge-hammer Sam!" he softly exclaimed. "I would give something to hear any talk that may pass between them. It

is so early in the evening there cannot be many people in the saloon, and they would spot me the moment I entered."

A sudden thought struck him, and he cried:

"I will try it!"

Then he wheeled and hurried back into the hotel. Straight to his room he went.

Thirty minutes later a rather slouchy-looking, roughly-dressed man came down the stairs and left the hotel. When he reached the street he softly chuckled:

"It is lucky the old man brought that carpet-bag of disguises. This one will work in very handy to-night. If any one recognizes me it will be Old Daddy himself!"

It was Violet Vane in disguise!

Straight toward the saloon across the street he made his way. At the door he paused to pull the slouch hat still further down over his eyes, then he lurched heavily against the portal, burst it open and staggered into the room.

"Whoop!" he gurgled, clinging to the door-knob and seeming to keep on his feet with considerable difficulty. "Heur I be, ther Howlin' Horror from Hot Hill! I'm on er rip-holy ole tear an' I'm boun' ter schplit things all open ur bu'st my b'iler. I'm loaded wish boodle thet I'm jesht boun' ter blow in! Git out ther way an' gnv P'ison Dave a chance ter spread hisself. Yow-wow! Whoop!"

Letting go the door, he staggered toward the bar, down upon which he slapped a ten-dollar gold piece.

"Coffin varnish, barkeep!" he shouted—"coffin varnish fer zish whole crowd! Cum up, pards, come up an' guzzle wish zer Howlin' Horror! I'm P'ison Dave, an' I've made er ten-strike, bet yer bouts! Feller ash don't want ter drink hain't bliged ter, but I kin lick schtuffin' outer him, b'thunder! Whoop!"

Elegant Ed, Sledge-hammer Sam and Mark Marden were sitting at a card-table in a distant part of the room. They were not playing, but were talking earnestly in a low tone. Neither of them offered to approach the bar, but the rest of the crowd hurried forward at the prospect of free drinks.

"Who ish zem galoots?" inquired the disguised Vane, pointing unsteadily toward the trio. "Reckon zey ish too good to drink wish me! Wal"—spitting at his hand and missing it by a foot—"I can lick zer hull six uf 'em, b'thunder!"

As he reeled toward the three the barkeeper called for him to take his change.

"Drink it up," was his reply. "W'at I care 'bout zat. I hash got lots more shame stuff. I ish goin' lick zem fellersh, b'thunder!"

But before he reached the table where the three were sitting he seemed to change his mind, and started to turn back. Then he reeled unsteadily and fell into a chair at a table. Uttering something like an angry grunt, he made an attempt to arise, but fell back. Then he glared around as if ready to fight.

Elegant Ed had been watching this performance.

"He is carrying a big jag," said the card-sharp. "I'll bet he'll be sound asleep at that table in less than two minutes."

CHAPTER XII.

UNMASKED.

To all appearance the disguised man was sleeping within a minute, having fell forward on the table in a sprawling position. The trio at the adjoining table paid little attention to him after that.

But it was plain they were speaking of something of a secret nature, for, to Vane's disappointment, their voices were so low he could only catch a word now and then. However, what he did hear was enough to make one or two points doubly certain in his mind.

Elegant Ed seemed to be the leading spirit, and, as he was speaking earnestly, Vane felt certain he was making his schemes plain to his companions. The others listened attentively, now and then putting in a word.

Vane lay in such a position that he could look through his fingers and watch the faces of the bully and the young man of the loud clothes, but the card-sharp sat nearly back toward him, which made it more difficult to understand his words.

When Ed had unfolded his plans, the one known as Mark Marden began speaking, and it was not long before the sport came to the conclusion he was telling of his encounter with Jack Corker, and the tragic termination of that meeting. As he went on, the disguised man could hear enough to be sure he was right.

A sudden thought entered Vane's head, and he came near laughing aloud.

"I will do it!" he thought.

Then, listening closely, he heard Mark Marden say:

"I did not mean to finish the fool, but he went down on his own knife."

"Well, it is good riddance," laughed Elegant Ed, speaking a bit louder than before. "I am glad he is out of our way. He never amounted to anything in the gang."

Then Sledge-hammer Sam seemed to declare:

"It wuz er derved murder, jest ther same!"

"What's that?" exclaimed the others, in chorus, turning on the tough with amazement.

"What did you say?"

"What do you mean?"

"I never said er derved word," asserted the tough.

"Oh, come now!" growled Elegant Ed, angrily. "That is too thin! How long since you have turned pious, Sam?"

"You're a pretty fellow to talk about murder!" sneered Marden. "Your hands are red enough! I am no hired assassin!"

The big ruffian uttered a subdued snarl and seemed ready to leap at the daring speaker.

"You want ter go mighty slow, young feller!" he hissed. "I hain't ther man ter stan' much of thet!"

"Here, here!" broke in the card-sharp. "We can't afford to quarrel."

Then their voices were lowered once more.

Violet Vane felt like hugging himself with delight. His little trick had worked like a charm, and he believed he knew where to look for the hired assassin of Daniel Marden.

For several minutes the three talked in a low tone, then they became less cautious, and Vane could catch a word now and then. Among other things, he heard "plucky girl," "safe in cellar," "have to dispose of her," etc.

With the listening man these bits of conversation made "assurance doubly sure," and it gave him a direct clew to the whereabouts of the real Marion Marden.

She was, without doubt, "safe in the cellar" of the house her father had built.

"I don't think much of this business," Sledge-hammer Sam seemed to suddenly assert.

"What business?" asked Elegant Ed, in astonishment.

"This gal-ketchin'."

The words were uttered in quite a loud tone, and the other two glanced around in consternation to see if they were overheard. The crowd near the bar were laughing and talking, and the apparently drunken man at the next table snored audibly.

"You fool!" hissed Elegant Ed, glaring at Sam. "What in thunder do you mean? You will give everything away! Speak lower!"

The ruffian returned the glare with interest.

"W'at's gnawin' ye?" he snorted. "I hain't said nothin'."

"You said you didn't think much of this business."

"I never! It wuz one of you as said thet."

Ed and Mark looked at each other.

"Did you say that?" asked the card-sharp.

"I didn't yip. Did you?"

"No."

"You fellers are both liars!" were the words which seemed to come from the bully's lips.

"Look here, Sam," sibilated Elegant Ed, "you are either drunk or crazy!"

At this the big fellow bristled.

"I dunno w'at's chawin' of you two critters," he snapped; "but I kin lick ther both of ye!"

Elegant Ed tried to make peace, but Mark Marden seemed to sneer:

"The big fool can't lick anything!"

That was enough to thoroughly arouse the bully. The next moment he reached for Marden's nose and caught it between his thumb and forefinger.

"I kin twist your rooter!" he averred.

And he proceeded to twist it.

With a howl of rage, Mark Marden arose and struck straight at Sam's face, but Elegant Ed thrust the blow aside and shoved the furious young man down into his seat.

"None of this!" exclaimed the card-sharp, sternly. "Are you both deranged? We cannot afford to quarrel!"

"He insulted me, an' I kin chaw him up!"

"The big bloke pulled my nose."

"Rats!"

The three stared at each other to see who had uttered the word.

Suddenly from beneath the table a solemn voice seemed to proceed, and they distinctly heard these words:

"You are all doomed! I am the shade of Daniel Marden, and I will follow you to your graves! Ha! ha! ha!"

The startled trio turned pale and started back.

"Holy blizzards!" gasped Sam.

"My God!" came from the gambler's lips.

Then they all looked under the table, but no person was there.

It would be difficult to imagine a more disconcerted trio. They were all badly frightened.

"What does it mean?" asked Mark Marden.

"I reckon ther ole cuss is arter us!" faltered Sledge-hammer Sam.

"Sh!" cautioned Ed. "We are attracting attention."

It was not strange their curious actions should cause the inmates of the saloon to stare inquiringly at them.

And at the next table the apparently drunken man seemed sleeping peacefully, the sound of his snoring coming to their ears.

"I believe there is some trickery about this," averred Elegant Ed. "Which of you fellows is trying to work a practical joke?"

Both of his companions asserted their innocence.

"Burt Bishop!"

The youngest of the three started.

"Who spoke my name?" he demanded, looking around.

"It was I," answered a voice that seemed to come from the air above his head.

"It was the devil himself!" muttered Ed.

Suddenly from beneath the table came a shriek that seemed uttered by a female.

"Help, help!" cried the strange voice. "I am Marion Marden and these three men are my deadly enemies! They have me confined in the cellar of my father's house, and they mean to murder me! Help! help!"

The villainous trio leaped to their feet in consternation and horror. Every person in the saloon had heard the cry, and the eyes of all were turned in that direction.

Sledge-hammer Sam trembled from head to feet and his knees knocked together. Elegant Ed was pale, but he had dropped a hand on the butt of a revolver.

Without a word, the gambler wheeled toward the disguised sport. Two strides carried him to Vane's side, and his hand fell on the shoulder of the apparently drunken man.

"I believe you know something about this monkey-business!" grated the gambler, yanking Vane into an upright position. "Great Scott!"

His fingers had become entangled in the sport's false beard, and the disguise was jerked from Vane's face.

"Violet Vane!"

With that cry, Elegant Ed tried to draw his weapon, but a revolver was flashed in his face, and the sport said, quite coolly:

"Go slow, Eddie, or chew lead!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THREE TO ONE.

Of course the reader has already fathomed the Velvet Sport's ruse and understands Vane had been bringing his ventriloquial powers into play. In that manner he had succeeded in settling several points in his mind.

He now no longer doubted Daniel Marden had been murdered, and he believed he could lay his hand on the wretch who did the deed. Elegant Ed was at the bottom of the whole affair. But he had learned another important thing. Seth Slouch had told the truth when he declared the name of the false Mark Marden was Burt Bishop.

Although not expecting the gambler's move, he had been ready for any emergency, and in the astonishment following the exposure of his face by the accidental removal of the false beard he had obtained the "drop."

"Hands off that barker!" commanded Vane, his dark eyes flashing dangerously. "I am not going to provide a target for you to practice on."

"So it is you, is it?" came hissing from the gambler's lips. "You were playing a pretty game, I swear!"

"If you swear you won't catch any fish," was the calm response. "It is a very bad practice—swearing. I should advise you to swear off."

"Curse you!"

"Now don't!"

"You are an infernal spy!"

"Is that the worst name you can think of? You are an infernal villain."

Elegant Ed fairly gnashed his teeth.

"So you pretended to be drunk and was listening all the time!" he fumed.

"That is about the size of it," smiled the Velvet Sport.

"You shall pay for your meddling!"

"I am afraid you will have to charge it, and it will be a long time before you collect the bill."

Sledge-hammer Sam and Mark Marden, the false, came forward. As they did so, a revolver appeared in the sport's left hand, and he covered them.

"Dern ye!" scowled the big bully.

"Hello, Sammie!" was Vane's bland greeting. "Is this really you? The last I saw of you, you were lying beside a cabin with a stone for your pillow. You seemed to be fast asleep."

This caused the tough to rub the back of his head and make a grimace.

"Head aches now, I suppose?" smiled the cool sport.

"Oh, you're goin' ter come ter ther eend of your rope purty soon."

"Bet you ten to one you come to the end of a rope first. The fact is, there is a rope waiting for you now, and the end will be around your neck when you come to it."

"You wait till I git another chance at ye!"

"I should think you would be satisfied, Sammie. You must be a regular hog."

"I'll do ye yit."

"If you remain in Magic, you will not live to do much of anything more. Your neck will get a bad pulling for what you have already done."

"What are you referrin' ter?"

"The murder of Daniel Marden."

The bully paled.

"Blast ye!" he grated. "Do you mean ter 'sinoowate I know ary blamed thing 'bout thet job?"

"You have struck it first shot."

"You're a derved liar ef you say so!"

"You will be given a chance to prove your innocence before long. Justice is on the track of this trio of villains."

"This is foolish talk!" cried Elegant Ed. "I do not understand what the idiot means!"

"You will understand a little later on."

"Put down those revolvers!"

"Well, I guess not."

"Put them down, or it will be the worse for you!"

"It would be the worse for me if I *did* put them down. No, no, Eddie! I know you for what you are—a treacherous rascal. I would not trust you so far as I could sling a steer by the tail."

"What do you mean by the trick you played a few moments ago?"

"Trick—what trick? Do you mean coming in here in this rig? My dear sir, there is no law for such a little escapade."

"That is not what I mean. You understand what I mean well enough."

"Think so?"

The sport's manner was terribly aggravating, and the elegant sharp of Magic City longed to fly at Vane's throat; but that threatening revolver told him he had better "go slow."

"You had better surrender," asserted Ed.

Vane looked amazed.

"Surrender! What for? To whom? There are two questions for you to answer."

And it puzzled the other to answer them.

"Well," came savagely from the card-sharp's lips, "if you will not surrender, we will take you. Spread out, boys, and come at him from different directions when I give the word."

"Keep your places, boys," ordered Vane. "The first one who moves gets perforated."

Neither of the elegant gambler's satellites dared make a move.

The crowd within the saloon looked on with increasing interest. It was a novel sight to witness one man holding three helpless beneath the muzzles of his revolvers. Violet Vane had won quite a reputation in Magic City since arriving there, and mutterings of admiration were heard on every side.

"He is a cooler!"

"He is a man of nerve!"

"Waal, you bet!"

"He's built of pure sand!"

"Elegant Ed has met his match."

"Yes, more than his match."

The Magic City sharp heard these words, and his face flushed hotly then paled till he looked as white as a corpse. He would have given any sum he possessed at that moment if he could have obtained a fair advantage over the cool man of the violets; but, being unable to obtain a fair advantage, he was willing to get it in any manner possible.

Just then it seemed a deadlock, and how to get out of it was something that puzzled Violet Vane. However, he resolved to try a ventriloquial trick, trusting to luck for success.

"Talk about surrendering," he laughed; "you are the ones to surrender."

"That's a fact," cried a voice behind the three. "We have them all covered, and they may as well cave in."

With one motion, the trio whirled to see who was behind them.

There was no one there!

Vane had "thrown" his voice and deceived them, but two or three moments passed before they understood this.

Then they wheeled back, with angry exclamations, to find that—

The sport was gone!

An open window explained how he had made his escape.

"Satan seize the luck!" snarled Elegant Ed, snatching out a revolver and leaping toward the window. "After him, pards! He must not get away!"

Without pausing for a look, he vaulted through the window into the darkness. His satellites were about to follow him, when they were amazed to see the form of their leader shoot back through the window and land on the floor at their feet!

Then the sound of a merry laugh came from without.

"Jump out, boys, and I will toss you back!" cried the voice of the slippery sport. "It is dead loads of fun!"

Both Sledge-hammer Sam and his companion drew revolvers and blazed away through the open window, regardless of who they hit, if they could "wing" their enemy by a fortunate chance.

At the very first shots there came a loud groan and the sound of a body falling to the ground.

"Whoop! Hooray!" bellowed the heavy-listed tough. "We hev plugged ther cuss kerchug! Thet's royal luck! Heur I go fer his ha'r!"

Then he vaulted through the window, revolver in hand.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DESPERATE MOVE.

SCARCELY had the bully's feet struck the ground beneath the window when he felt himself seized by a clutch of steel, and a mocking voice laughed in his ear:

"Fooled you, Sammie—fooled you in great shape! You did not even graze me with your lead."

Then the tough was lifted bodily into the air and cast back through the window, as his chief had been a few moments before. Although a small man, the strength of the Velvet Sport was simply marvelous.

Elegant Ed was just struggling to his feet when the huge body of his satellite came hurtling through the window. Sam's head struck the gambler fairly in the pit of the stomach, and both fell sprawling and howling to the floor.

To the spectators of this strange scene this occurrence seemed supremely ridiculous, and the crowd burst into a roar of laughter.

"Oh, holy Moses and the prophets!" howled one fellow. "Did you ever see the likes of that? That little cuss in velvet must be a boly jim-howler! He is up to all manner of tricks, and it will take more than a good man to down him."

The false Mark Marden drew back from the window, as if he feared the sport would come vaulting through himself in another minute.

But Vane did not appear.

Sledge-hammer Sam and the gambler were furious as they arose to their feet. The laughter of the crowd cut the proud spirit of the card-sharp to the quick. He did not fancy being the sport of such a throng.

"Double dern ther slipperty leetle rip!" snarled the bully. "We'll git at him yit!"

"Jump out of the window and he will throw you back!" laughed one of the crowd.

"He is more than a match for the three!" asserted another.

"He is a Jim-dandy from Headwaters!"

"I am betting all my wealth on him!"

"Me too!"

Elegant Ed took note of the speakers, and his heart was hot with anger as he saw among them those who had professed friendship for him in the past.

"If Violet Vane is not destroyed, he will work my ruin!" was his thought. "The little devil must be put out of the way!"

But he did not offer to follow the sport through the window again. Instead of that, he turned to his companions and asked them to follow him, then led the way from the saloon by the back entrance.

As soon as they were outside they began to look for the man who had tricked them, but Violet Vane was already far from the vicinity of the saloon.

After causing the bully to follow his master back through the window, Vane waited for nothing more.

"I do not fancy any more of them will follow me by the window," he thought. "If I remain, they will try to get the drop on me in some other way, so I will take a skip."

Not till he was far from the saloon did he pause; then he halted in the deeper shadow of a cabin.

"Well," he muttered, "things have about come to a boiling point. There will be hot times before long, or I am mistaken. I can now see quite through the scheme, and I have the chief rascals spotted. I suppose I ought to go to the marshal and have him search the Marden house, but thoughts of that lovely girl hold me back. I would save her when the crash comes. How she became entangled in this game with such a set of villains is more than I can understand, for I will not believe she is a common adventuress. I am versed in the art of reading faces, and I know she has not an evil countenance. She can never be anything to me, but for all that I love her!"

For some moments he was silent, as if thinking deeply, but at length he began muttering again:

"I would give something to know if Bruce Weldon is concerned with this gang of rascals. His face was a puzzle to me, I will confess, although I decided he was honest. If he is crooked, he is a good actor, to say the least. But he has disappeared. I cannot find him, and that looks bad. It almost seems as if he had skipped to escape the crash that is coming. My words gave him the knowledge he was suspected, and his disappearance looks bad for him, to say the very least about that point."

"Then there is Seth Slouch—who and what is he? He is not what he appears, that is plain to me. He is in disguise, but is he an honest man or a rascal? His story sounded weak, but the fact that he told me the false Mark Marden's true name counts in his favor. He may be a detective."

"One more man in disguise is Old Bob Shucks. His disguise is simple, indeed, but my enemies little dream he is Old Daddy Duzenberry, as faithful a friend as I ever had. He has succeeded in working his way into their confidence, and together we will baffle their schemes."

"I wonder where Daddy is now."

"Waal, I'm jest about heur," observed a drawling voice, and the tall figure of the man who had given his name as Old Bob Shucks appeared.

"I never'd knowed you in that rig if I hedn't heered yer voice, pard."

"And still I obtained this rig from the bag of disguises you brought, old man," laughed Vane, as he warmly shook his ally's hand.

"Waal, I never pawed 'em over ter see whut thar wur thar. I jest fetched 'em along, as you said."

"What news?"

"Good enough."

"Then that is good enough. You have made a discovery?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Did you git my letter?"

"I did."

"Waal, in that I tole ye Mark Marden warn't no Mark Marden."

"Yes."

"An' ther right gal wur a prisoner."

"Yes."

"Waal, sence then I have found aout whar she is."

"You have! Where?"

"In the cellar of the haouse that b'longs to her."

"I suspected as much."

"Waal, I know haow ter git inter that haouse."

"You do?"

"Sart'in."

"How?"

"By a winder."

"But they must keep the windows fastened?"

"I have left one of 'em unfastened, fer I managed to git inter ther ranch with ther gang. I foun' er chance ter unfasten a winder while I wur thar, an' you bet I 'proved my oppertoonity."

"You had no chance to make an investigation?"

"Nary chance."

"Did you see the girl?"

"Thunder, no. She's cooped up in the cellar, I tell ye."

"I do not mean that one, but the other."

"Oh, yes, I saw her. Say, thar's suthin' mighty sing'ler abaout that gal."

"How? What do you mean?"

"Waal, I only got a glimps' of her, but that wur enough ter see she hed bin cryin'."

"Crying?"

"Tell her eyes wur red."

"And she had been weeping when I called: I swear I cannot understand it!"

"That warn't all. I heerd her an' ther feller as they call Elegant Ed have a terrific set-to."

"A set-to?"

"Yes."

"What kind of a set-to?"

"He wur tryin' ter make her do suthin' an she jest swore she'd be 'tarnally jimfizzled if she'd do it."

The Velvet Sport struck his hands together excitedly.

"For all of her position, I do not believe that girl is all bad!" he cried.

"Mebbe not," acknowledged Daddy Duzenberry; "but she's in all-fired bad comp'ny."

"That is true, but we must not judge her till we know what fortune placed her there."

"I hain't settin' myself up as jedge."

"She must be saved from the catastrophe that is coming."

"Haow ye goin' ter do it 'thout givin' her chainece ter warn t'others?"

"That is a difficult thing to tell; but I shall try to find a way."

"Sasy," drawled the old fellow.

"What is it?"

"Aire ye stuck on that gal?"

Vane faced Daddy Duzenberry squarely, laying a hand on the old man's arm.

"It is not often I make a fool of myself," came slowly from his lips. "Do not be hard on me, Daddy, if I am a trifle foolish in this matter!"

The old man laughed.

"I have bin thar myself, pard," he asserted. "I once did love a blue-haired an' auburn-eyed dam-sel ter distraction, an' I kinder thort she returned my affection with compaound int'rust. I wur younger then than I be naow—younger by sevaral moons. I spent my time in lally-gaggin' raound 'Mandy an' buyin' peanuts an' merlasses candy fer her. I swore she wuz ther sweetest of sweet sweet-cakes, an' she called me her ducky ducky-wucksy. I thort I hed her solid fast, an' I knowed I c'u'dn't live 'thout her. She tole me I wur ther very soul of her existence. But she went an merried 'Bijah Bodfish, an' if thar wur ever a feller I jest deespised it wur 'Bijah. It nighly broke my heart, an' fer as much as three days I felt like doin' suthin' desprit, but I got over it arter a time!"

Vane had scarcely heard the old fellow's words, for he had been buried in deep thought while Daddy was speaking. He now observed:

"You say you can get into the Marden house?"

"Sart'in."

"Then let's go there at once. We may as well do so now as at any time. Perhaps we can get in and rescue Marion Marden without further delay."

Daddy was ready for the adventure, and they were soon moving toward the residence of the murdered mine-owner.

CHAPTER XV.

AN UNFORUNATE GIRL.

In a short time they had reached the house and were at work on the window which Daddy declared he had unfastened from the inner side. It was soon opened, and Vane followed the old man into the house.

"Do you know the way to get into the cellar?" asked the sport, in a cautious whisper.

"No; we've got ter find ther way."

They moved with caution and were soon in a hallway. Daddy was some distance in advance. Suddenly at Vane's very side a door swung open and the false Marion Marden appeared with a light in her hand.

"I thought I heard a slight noise," she said. Then she caught sight of the sport and uttered a suppressed scream.

Filled with dismay at this occurrence, Daddy Duzenberry stood still and was not seen by the girl.

In a moment the wearer of the violets turned toward the girl, speaking with wonderful self-possession:

"I beg you not to be frightened, miss. There is not the least cause for alarm."

She had fallen back a step and nearly dropped the lamp. Her face was blanched and she trembled in every limb.

"Who—who are you?" she gasped, with the greatest difficulty. "Can it be—Mr. Howard?"

"Yes, it is I."

"But—but, how came you here?"

"Business brought me."

"Business? I do not understand."

He stepped boldly into the room and closed the door, leaving Daddy Duzenberry in the hall. A glance showed him the curtains of the room were drawn so any one could not look in from without.

The girl placed the lamp upon a small stand, then sunk tremblingly into a chair.

"You gave me such a fright!" she said, faintly. "Oh, this horrid house! I will not stay in it another night! How came you here?"

"Never mind how I came here," was his retort, as he stood before her, drinking in her quivering beauty with his dark eyes. "I came for your good."

"For my good? I do not understand!"

"Possibly not. I will explain. I fancy my appearance was like that of a burglar."

She attempted to force a smile, but it was a sorry failure.

"I fancied I secured the door, but I must have left it unfastened. Did I?"

"I cannot say, for I came in by a window."

"A window!"

"Yes; and now I seem more than ever like a burglar."

"Oh, but I know you are not! Still I cannot understand it."

"Have you thought of the other possibility?"

"Which?"

"I may be a detective."

She sprung to her feet, uttering a low cry of horror and shrinking from him.

"You—you a detective?" she gasped.

Her dismay and fear cut him to the heart, for her appearance was that of a guilty thing. A low groan forced itself from his lips, and he turned his head away. When he looked back she had sunk into the chair again and covered her face with her handkerchief.

For some moments both were silent. Vane was the one to speak first:

"I have come here to save you."

"To save me?"

"Yes."

"I do not understand."

He walked twice the length of the room, then paused before her again.

"I speak the truth when I say I am here to save you," he declared. "It all depends on whether you will consent to be saved or not."

"I do not understand you now."

"How can I make my meaning plainer? You must know how desperate is the game in which you are engaged."

"Game! What game?"

He made a gesture of entreaty.

"Do not feign innocence, I entreat you! It can avail you nothing now, for I know the whole black truth. I know how you have deceived the people of Magic City. You are not what you pretend to be. I am not the only one who knows this, and a terrible storm is approaching. I am here to save you from its fury."

"Why should you do this for me?"

In a moment he was at her side and had both her hands clasped in his, while he gazed into her blue eyes. His entire being was athrob with a devouring passion; his warm breath fanned her cheek. At that moment the usually cool and nerry sport quite lost control of himself. He threw reason to the winds. Swiftly, almost fiercely, he spoke:

"Why should I do this for you? Because I love you! Nay, do not attempt to take your hands away, for I will not let them go! You must listen to me! I love you! I love you! Your eyes, your hair, your lips—your whole being I love! You are more than life to me! It must be you love me in return! It cannot be otherwise!"

She seemed too astounded to speak, but the hot flush that filled her cheeks gave him courage. He felt her hands trembling in his grasp. In another moment he had her in his arms.

"My little darling!" he murmured. "I know you love me, and nothing shall tear us apart! I will pass through fire and flood to retain you!"

Her face was upturned, her red lips were tempting—in a moment he was raining kisses upon them.

That seemed to arouse her. With the cry of a frightened creature, she tore her herself from his grasp and stood panting before him. She drew herself up to her full height and her blue eyes flashed. When he would have clasped her in his arms once more, she waved him back.

"No!" she cried; "no, no, no! I am not what you think! I understand you only too well! I may have fallen, but I have not come to that!"

He saw she misunderstood his love, and he was cut to the heart.

"You do not understand me!" he hastily asserted. "I mean you no wrong!"

But she shook her head.

"I swear it!" he cried—"I swear it by high Heaven!"

Still she seemed to doubt.

"How can it be otherwise?" she asked, doubtfully. "You say you know me for what I am. Then how can you love me with an honest love?"

"I care not what you are, I love you! You must believe me! I will make you believe!"

She seemed to hesitate, and he sprung to her side.

"I will prove my love by any test you may demand!" he declared. "If you will marry me at once—"

"Would you marry me?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Can you mean it?"

"Again I swear!"

She put out her hands, as if struck with sudden blindness, and sunk into the chair, moaning:

"Oh, God! why did not this love come to me before? Now it is too late—too late!"

A horrible chill struck to his heart; he fell on his knees at her side; he caught her hands and held them fast.

"Don't say that!" came tremblingly from his lips. "Don't, don't! It cannot be too late!"

But she only sobbed:

"It is, it is!"

"How too late? why too late? Explain your words! Great God! It cannot be you are married to another?"

She shook her head.

"Not yet, not yet!"

"Then it is not too late! That is the only way that could hold you. You love me—I can read it in your beautiful face and in your blue eyes! I love you! What can keep us apart? The whole world shall not!"

"But, you do not understand—you do not know all the truth. You know I am an adventurer—usurping the place of another. You know that, and still you love me?"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

Her bosom rose and fell convulsively.

"It does not seem possible; I can scarcely believe it! Oh, that I could set myself right in your eyes, for I do love you!"

"I knew it!" he cried, exultantly.

"You know not how I despise myself—you cannot know! I was forced into this wretched plot, and I did not know how bad it was. Oh, that poor girl. I have threatened to set her free, but he swore he would kill me if I did."

"I knew it was like that!" cried Vane, exultantly. "But, who holds this power over you?"

"My brother."

"And your brother is—"

"In Magic City he is known as Elegant Ed."

"Ha!"

"Yes, he is at the bottom of this scheme. He says Daniel Marden once did him a great injury, and he is only trying to get what is rightfully his due. It was by telling such a tale he lured me into the wretched deception. He did not let me know another girl was to be made a prisoner. Now I have begun to believe he did not tell the truth when he said Mr. Marden had done him an injury."

"Surely not. But, who is this fellow who professes to be Mark Marden, your brother?"

She made a gesture of repugnance.

"He is one whom my brother swears I shall marry!"

"Do you care for him?"

"I abhor him, yet fear him!"

"Yet you have consented to marry him?"

"I dared not do otherwise. Oh, sir, you do not know my brother—you do not understand the influence he wields over me! Never have I dared disobey him in anything. When he tells me to do a thing I am compelled to do it whether I wish or not, for a will other than my own seems to govern me. I am in constant fear of him, and, oh! so unhappy!"

"The wretch! You shall be removed from his evil influence, for it would ruin you, darling! I will protect you from him, my little one. And this other—do you think I will give you up to him! He shall never possess you—never!"

"And would you still marry me?"

"Yes!—a hundred times, yes!"

A glad cry came from her lips.

"Then let's go from here—let's go at once!" she exclaimed, excitedly. "They may come and find you! There is no time to be lost!"

"You are right, little one. What shall I call you?"

"My name is Lona Lewis."

"You are right, Lona; no time is to be lost. But the rightful Marion Marden must be set free before we leave this house; your brother's crooked game must be baffled. For your sake I will not attempt to bring him to justice, though he richly merits punishment."

"Are you truly a detective?"

"Not a professional. I am working this case on my own account."

She looked at him admiringly, and he caught her in his strong arms once more, kissing her tenderly on the lips.

"Where is the girl confined?" he asked.

"In the cellar."

"Then we will go down."

"There is another prisoner there."

"Another?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"A young man who attempted to rescue her. He was Daniel Marden's mine superintendent."

"It is Bruce Weldon!" cried Vane.

Then he took up the lamp, adding:

"We will not lose another moment. Lead the way, Lona."

They passed from the room together and Vane looked around for Daddy Duzenberry. To his amazement, the old man had vanished, but he found himself confronted by Elegant Ed and his two satellites, Burt Bishop and Sledgehammer Sam!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STRUGGLE IN THE CELLAR.

THE Velvet Sport's hand disappeared into a pocket where lay a ready revolver, but before he could produce the weapon he received a terrific blow on the head and was knocked senseless.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Sledgehammer Sam, who had wielded the club that robbed Vane of his senses. "I reckon that kind of knocks the slippery critter stiff fer ther time! Holy Moses! but I did swat him a good one!"

"Have you killed him?" asked Elegant Ed, eagerly.

"Dunno, boss; mebbe so, mebbe not. But I kin finish ther job with one or two more licks like thet. Reckon I'll let him hev."

Lona had seemed dazed by the sudden calamity, but now she uttered a scream, sprung forward and struck out with both hands. Her hard knuckles found the brutal bully's face, and Sam reeled back against the wall.

"Wretches!" she cried.

Then she wheeled and faced her brother and the man he would force her to marry. She stood over the fallen sport as if she would protect him from further harm. Her figure was drawn to its greatest height, her hands clinched, her blue eyes flashing, her lips drawn back till her white teeth were exposed. Regally beautiful she looked in all the fury that possessed her soul at that moment!

Burt Bishop had caught the lamp from Violet Vane's hand as the sport fell, but he came near dropping it in his amazement as he witnessed this exhibition of spirit on the part of the girl whom he had considered spiritless in her brother's presence. For the moment Elegant Ed's power over his sister was naught! Some other influence was greater!

"Great Jinks!" gurgled Sledgehammer Sam. "Thet wuz er reg'lar swynder! Your pussy cat has claws, Pard Ed."

No one could have been more astonished than the gambler himself.

"What does this mean?" he demanded.

"It means you shall not murder this man!" was the brave reply. "You shall not touch him!"

"You fool!" hissed Ed. "Will you spoil everything now we have him fairly in the snare? You have played your part well."

"Yes," she cried, wildly, "I have played it well—too well! too well!"

"What do you mean?"

"Mean? Just this: you wished me to lead him into a snare by making him fall in love with me. I have succeeded, but at the same time I have learned to love him."

"Fool!" again broke from the card-sharp's lips. "You should have possessed more reason! You can be nothing to him! He is a spy—a detective! He would ruin us all! Another has a claim on you, as you must well understand!"

"It is false! No living being has a claim on me! You have tried to force me into an obnoxious alliance with one for whom I feel nothing but repugnance, but Burt Bishop shall never possess me!"

Bishop himself said nothing, for he knew not what to say, but his face turned pale.

"Now the doom of this velvet-clad spy is sealed!" Elegant Ed snarled. "He shall never live to leave this house! Lona, you must be insane! He would drag us all to ruin! he would cast us behind prison bars! Even you would not escape! His affection for you is a farce gotten up to deceive you while he worked his game! Girl, you must come to your senses!"

He saw his words had some effect upon her, and he followed up the advantage. Suddenly she sunk on her knees beside the prostrate sport and lifted his head to her lap. Wildly she gazed into his pallid face.

"Devils!" she shrieked, "you can do him no further harm! He is dead!"

It looked as if she had spoken the truth.

"Et may be, boss," nodded Sam, as Ed cast an inquiring look toward him. "I 'low I swatted him a solid 'un, though I didn't think it ernough ter finish him."

Again and again Lona called to the man she loved. In utter abandon she kissed his lips. They seemed cold to her touch, and once more crying out he was dead, she sunk fainting on his body.

"It is all the better," said the gambler, although there was a look of pain on his face. "She will not bother us now. Burt, take her back into that room, while Sam and I look after this dog of a detective."

Burt Bishop lifted the unconscious girl in his arms and carried her into the room indicated, Ed following with the lamp, which he returned to the stand.

For a moment the gambler stood looking pityingly down at the marble-like face of his sister, his countenance working strangely, then he turned away, with something like a groan.

"Look after her, Burt," he said, hoarsely. "Get some water and bathe her face and wrists. Loosen her dress. When she recovers, tell her we have set Violet Vane free. That may keep her quiet."

He passed from the room to another where he found a candle. Lighting this, he returned to Sledgehammer Sam, who was standing over the body of the still insensible sport.

"Can you carry him, Sam?"

"Waal, you bet!"

The bully lifted Vane in his arms, and Ed led the way. In that manner they descended to the cellar.

The cellar was not very large, but it was well built, the floor and walls being cemented. At one side an iron door was set in the wall. Whatever Daniel Marden had it built for no one knew, but beyond the door was a dungeon-like apartment. This cell the plotters had found very handy for their use in carrying out their desperate scheme to secure the whole or a part of Marden's wealth.

The two villains did not take their new captive to the dungeon. At the chief conspirator's command, Sam unceremoniously dumped the insensible Vane on the cemented bottom of the cellar. Ed had brought some cords along, and they proceeded to bind the sport, although such trouble seemed like wasting time.

"I don't reckon he'll squirm much fer some time ter come," grinned the brutal tough.

But, Vane's head was harder than they thought, and it was not long before he showed signs of returning consciousness.

"Dern my eyes!" exclaimed the big rough. "He is er tough leetle nut."

When Vane opened his eyes his gaze rested on the face of Elegant Ed revealed to him by the light of the candle. At first the sport was dazed and his head throbbed with a terrible pain that prevented him from recognizing the exultant countenance of his bitter foe; but the sneering, triumphant voice of the Magic City sharp cleared away the clouds which seemed hanging around his brain.

"Well, my pretty bird," cried Ed, "we have you safe and fast. Your goose is as good as cooked."

"Thet's er fact, fer I'm goin' ter finish cookin' it purty soon."

The sound of Sledgehammer Sam's harsh voice gave Vane a start and he turned his eyes to see the wretch leering down upon him. The villains certainly seemed triumphant.

The sport tried to speak, but his tongue seemed paralyzed. He was unable to utter a sound just then, and his captors laughed in his face.

"You are not so very brave after all," cried Ed. "Fear has frozen your tongue. You will be begging for your life in a few moments."

They did not know him yet. Beg for his life of such creatures as they! No torture they could inflict would cause him to do that!

"You made a fool of yourself when you attempted to butt against me," went on the elegant.

sharp, as he crouched by Vane's side. "Did you think you were my match in cunning? Ha! ha! ha! I know tricks you never dreamed of! You came here through a trick, for you fancied you had won the love of my sister. Ha! ha! You must consider yourself a charmer indeed to be able to win the love of a girl in such a short space of time! She played her part well, and now—"

"Stop!" cried Vane, suddenly recovering his power of speech. "Say no more of her! She is too good, too noble for her name to pass your Satan's lips! You her brother! Great Heaven! it cannot be possible!"

"That is the stuff!" laughed Elegant Ed. "I am glad to see you can still talk! I want to hear you whimper and whine before Sam here shuts off your wind for good!"

"You murderous devil!"

"Hard words do not cause broken bones, you know. I have not a little bit of love for you, and I reckon Sam has less than I, if possible."

"That's kirect, boss."

"You are our captive, and you are alone with us in this old cellar. Yell—scream for help, if you will; no one will hear you. Daniel Marden must have planned this cellar for a private prison, but he could not have dreamed who would put it to use."

"I should fancy his spirit would haunt his murderer. Crime-stained wretch! how can you sleep nights!"

"As sweetly as a child. It was not my hand that struck the blow which ended the life of Dan Marden. He was slain by another person."

Then he was murdered! The gambler had confessed as much.

"If your hand did not strike the blow, I believe your brain planned it, and that beast, there, was the executor of your foul plot?"

"What if you are right! I had good cause to hate Dan Marden—a cause of which none in Magic knew. When I came here and found him prospering, I resolved to ruin him; but he was powerful and wealthy. I coveted his wealth, but I saw no way to gain possession of it while he lived. Then I resolved he should die. He is dead!"

"And you are as much his murderer as if your hand struck the fatal blow!"

"Have it that way if you like; you will not live to prate it to the world."

"You would stain your hands with more blood?"

"Without a shudder, so long as it is your blood."

"What a heartless wretch you are!"

"Heartless? Perhaps that is the right word, but I have been called nervy."

"The nerve of a villain!"

"Oh, w'at's ther use of bandyin' words with ther critter, pard?" impatiently cried Sam. "Let's finish him off an' git ther job off our han's!"

"Don't be in a hurry, Sam. I want him to fully understand how he has played into our hands. He fancied he had deceived Lona by winning her love, and he was going to use her against us. Ha! ha! ha!"

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the card-sharp's satellite.

"Now I will tell you the truth," and Ed gazed sneeringly into the prostrate man's dark eyes. "My sister cares not a whit for you. I asked her to lead you into the snare if she could, and you stumbled right into it. While you are lying here she is with the man who is to become her husband. They are in a room above, waiting till I shall return and announce that you are forever out of our way. Did you hold her in your arms? Did you kiss her? Now she is in the arms of another and his kisses are on her lips. She is—"

With a cry of a furious animal, Vane burst his bonds asunder and leaped to his feet.

"Wretches! murderers!" he thundered, his face convulsed with his terrible fury, the cords standing out upon neck and temple. "You shall not kill me like a dog! I am unarmed, but I am a match for you both!"

Sledge-hammer Sam sprang toward the sport, but Vane sent him reeling to the floor with a single blow. Then he was clinched by the Magic City sharp, and a desperate struggle ensued. Vane knew he was fighting for his life—for more than life—for Lona!

CHAPTER XVII.

DADDY ON HAND.

WITH a wonderful exertion of strength, Vane dashed his foe to the hard floor with stunning force.

But, Sledge-hammer Sam was on his feet, and the sport was caught behind and hurled down.

Vane was dazed by the violence of the fall.

"Now, dern ye! I will wipe ye out!"

The candle-light fell on a knife that glittered in the up-raised hand of the murderous wretch, but, at that instant, a sharp scream was heard above, then came the sound of hurrying feet.

With a snarl, the ruffian struck at Vane with the knife.

By a quick squirm, the sport evaded the stroke in a measure, although he felt a sharp pain that told him he had been touched. Had he not moved, the blade would have reached his heart.

Again the knife was lifted. Vane saw a flitting form leaping down the stairs.

"Cuss ye!" grated the desperate bully. "I'll fix ye this time!"

Vane attempted to evade the stroke once more.

Useless effort!

But for the hand of another he would have been doomed.

With another cry of horror, a repetition of the shriek heard above, the flitting form sprang at the murderous tough and hurled him aside.

But the knife had fallen again, and once more it found a living sheath.

Vane knew he was now badly wounded. He tried to rise to his feet, partially succeeded, then black spots floated before his eyes, his head swam and he sunk down limply.

Was it fancy, or did he hear the loud calling of manly voices and the tramp of booted feet? He knew soft arms were about his neck—he felt kisses on his lips! Then he heard her calling to him—Lona!

What was that? Though his senses were reeling and consciousness was slipping from him, he recognized the voice of a man who shouted:

"Come on, you fellers! Heur they be, ther hull gosh blamed pot an' b'ilin'! Naow we have got 'em!"

Old Daddy Duzenberry was on hand.

He found the sport unconscious and bleeding, in the arms of a beautiful girl who seemed crazed with grief and despair, as she shrieked:

"Dead! dead! dead!"

To Vane all was like a wild dream that followed. For days he seemed fighting his foes, but they always had the best of the conflict. He was not battling for himself, but for her—for Lona! He thought they were trying to tear her from him, and life was nothing without her. There were other fancies. He fell from awful heights; he waded in blood; he fought his mad way through scorching flames. He was in the bleak desert, devoured by a horrible thirst. He shrieked for water, water! Then she came and held a cooling draught to his parched lips. He begged her to stay with him, and she promised not to leave his side. He would sleep, then awake with a start and call wildly to her. She always answered; she was always there! Like a good angel she hovered near; and her soft touch calmed him in his wildest moments. How he loved her! how he loved her!

One day he recovered his right mind and found himself lying on a clean white bed. He looked around for her, but she was not there. Then he fell to wondering how much of the strange things he could remember was real and how much were the imaginings of a disordered brain. He knew he had been very ill—near to the door of death, for he remembered about being stabbed.

The doctor came, and with him came a beautiful girl. The wounded sport gazed eagerly at her, but uttered a sigh of disappointment.

It was not Lona.

The doctor pronounced the patient much better, but cautioned them to keep him quiet. Vane would have asked questions, but the privilege was denied him. At length he fell asleep, having eaten some light but nourishing food.

With one or two brief waking intervals, the sport slept until another day came. When he awoke a pleasant-faced young man was sitting by his bedside.

"Hello!" exclaimed the young man, in a cheerful voice. "How do you feel now?"

"Better," was the prompt reply.

"I am glad to hear that, for you have had quite a pull at it; but the Doc said yesterday you were all right. You will be around in a short time now."

Vane looked hard at the speaker, then said:

"There seems something familiar about you, but I can't make out just what it is."

The other laughed.

"I suppose you remember Seth Slouch?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, I am he. That was a disguise."

"Who are you now?"

"I am Mark Marden!"

Then the young man explained that he was the genuine Mark Marden, and Burt Bishop had been his pard in the past. He acknowledged he had led something of a wild life. One night he quarreled with Bishop, and the young fellow tried to murder him. Bishop thought he had succeeded, but Mark was cared for by an old mountaineer till he was ready to take the trail and call Burt Bishop to an account. He tracked him to Magic City, and there learned of the desperate game in which his former partner was concerned. Knowing Lona Lewis was not his sister, and believing his sister had fallen into the hands of the schemers, Mark attempted to probe the matter while still keeping disguised as he had been during the time he was trailing his treacherous pard.

When Vane followed Lona into the room, the night he entered the Marden house by a window, Daddy Duzenberry had feared a trap and at once hurried away for aid. An hour later, followed by the marshal and a crowd of men, among whom was the disguised Mark Marden, the faithful old fellow broke into the house. The party reached the cellar just in time to save Violet Vane's life, though they found him seriously wounded. Beyond the iron door at one side of the cellar Marion Marden and Bruce Weldon were found, confined in a dungeon-like cell.

In conclusion Mark said:

"The girl who had so successfully played the part of my sister fancied you were dead, and she denounced Sledge-hammer Sam as your murderer. Within ten minutes the furious crowd had lynched the wretch. Thus the murderer of my father met his doom, for he confessed the crime before he was strung up."

"Elegant Ed and Burt Bishop were made prisoners, but they succeeded in escaping. However, Daddy Duzenberry is on their trail, and he swears he will round 'em up."

"But the girl—Lona?" asked Vane, eagerly.

"She remained by your side as your nurse till night before last," was the reply. "She suddenly and mysteriously disappeared in the night, and she has not been seen since. I fancy she has gone to join her brother."

For a long time the wounded sport lay without speaking. He seemed very calm. At length he stretched out one hand and said, with a simple earnestness that made his declaration binding as the most solemn oath:

"I will find her."

The affair was the greatest sensation ever known in Magic City. As may be imagined, Violet Vane was given great credit for the part he had played in the exposure of the crooked game, and the camp was filled with delight when it was known the gritty little sport would surely recover from the wounds he had received.

Mark and Marion Marden came into possession of the property that was rightfully theirs by heirship.

Bruce Weldon, Daniel Marden's mine superintendent, fell in love with Marion while he was confined with her in the dark dungeon beneath the house, and before a year she became his wife.

The cellar-dungeon was filled up and obliterated.

When Violet Vane was able to do so, he turned his face from Magic City. He was cheered by the large crowd assembled to witness his departure. Some tried to induce him to remain longer in the camp, but he firmly shook his head.

He now had a double mission!

THE END.

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